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LIFE OF
HERBERT HENRY ASQUITH, LORD OXFORD AND ASQUITH

By

J. A. SPENDER AND CYRIL ASQUITH

VOLUME II

WITH 19 ILLUSTRATIONS

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LORD OXFORD AND ASQUITH

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HOME RULE AND ULSTER

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J. A. S.

In the middle of January 1912 Asquith went for three weeks to Sicily, travelling via Toulon and Naples in company with Mr. Edwin Montagu. His letters show him in good spirits, taking a keen interest in the voyage down the Mediterranean past Corsica, Elba, Caprera, and Monte Christo, and learning piquet ("quite a useful resource for two people and a difficult game"). "I wish you were here," he wrote to his wife. "You would find some of the necessary horrors of sea-travel—early morning noises, bad smells, etc., but a cool clear air and for the most part bright sun: above all, the sense of being away from both the small and large worries of life. I read the Italian grammar and *Tante*,[1] which just fails, but is not far from being very good." Palermo delighted him, and he finds it "in situation quite as well off as Naples." The Sicilians he pronounces to be "a semi-barbarous race who drive about in gaily painted carts, and live like Irish peasants with pigs, hens, etc., under the same roof. . . . The roads are in a shocking state and would have made short work of the Rolls Royce. We drive about in hardy local motors which jump and skid among the ruts and furrows." 1912 Age 59–60

He was back in Downing Street by the beginning of February, and facing up to the next great wave which had now to be breasted.

All through the autumn and winter of 1911–12 the Cabinet had been at work on the Bill which was to be the final attempt of the

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[1] A recently published novel.

1912
Age 59–60

Parliament of the United Kingdom to settle the Irish question on the lines laid down by Mr. Gladstone in 1886. For twenty-six years Home Rule for Ireland had been part of the avowed policy of the Liberal Party, and a Liberal Government came now for the third time, proposing a Bill to Parliament. But there was a difference between the third time and either of the previous times. No longer could the Unionist Party rely on the House of Lords to block the way, if their opposition in the Commons should be overborne. There was now every probability that a Home Rule Bill would pass the Commons and after the interval of two years become law. This from the beginning gave a new edge to the controversy, and led the more implacable opponents of Home Rule to seek a substitute for the House of Lords as a means of frustrating the policy.

Asquith knew the Irish controversy by heart. He had lived with it all through his political life, and sat in Cabinet with Mr. Gladstone when he made his last effort in 1893. The Bill of 1912 followed the Gladstonian line of transferring purely Irish matters to the Irish Parliament, while reserving to the Imperial Parliament all questions touching the Crown, the making of peace or war, treaties and foreign relations, new Customs duties, and certain other services either temporarily or permanently. For the first six years the Royal Irish Constabulary was to remain under the Imperial Government, and the Irish Parliament was debarred from establishing or endowing any religion or imposing religious disabilities of any kind. The Common Treasury still remained, and though the Irish Parliament might raise new Irish taxes, it could not add more than 10 per cent to the income tax, death duties, or customs duties (except on beer and spirits) imposed by the Imperial Parliament. An elaborate financial arrangement was part of the Bill, and it was proposed to settle the vexed question of Irish representation in the Imperial Parliament by reducing the number of Irish members to forty-two, and leaving them at liberty to speak or vote on all subjects. This Bill was not an extreme one; on the contrary, the main question about it, as an administrative measure, was whether after the numerous concessions to Unionist sentiment made in the original proposal and afterwards in Committee, it would have been a workable measure.

Asquith was aware from the beginning that Ulster would be his most formidable difficulty, and during February 1912 the Cabinet anxiously debated whether Ulster or those counties in which Protestants were in a clear majority should be given an option to contract out in the Bill as introduced, or whether this should be reserved as a concession for a later stage. Ministers decided that the Bill as introduced should apply to all Ireland, but that the Irish leaders should be warned that "the Government held themselves free to make changes, if it became clear that special treatment must be provided for the Ulster Counties, and that in this case the Government will be ready to recognise the necessity either by amendment or by not pressing it (the Bill) on under the provision of the Parliament Act."[1] These are Asquith's own words (February 1912), but he was strong on the point that the Government policy—the policy which the Government preferred and recommended—should be a policy for all Ireland. This, in his view, was the ideal to be aimed at, and, though circumstances might require it to be modified or compromised, the Government should not start by admitting it to be impossible.

It may be said in the light of after events that this decision was a mistake, but at the moment there were great difficulties in doing anything else. There were Nationalist and Catholic majorities in a considerable part of Ulster, and taking the Province as a whole, its representation was equally divided between Unionists and Nationalists. It was certain that the exclusion of Ulster would be deeply resented by the Nationalists, and extremely doubtful whether it would propitiate either Ulster or the Unionist Party. For both had declared themselves unalterably opposed to Home Rule for any part of Ireland, and with or without the exclusion of Ulster; and many said openly that, if it had to be, they preferred that it should be for a United Ireland in which the Southern Unionists would not be left isolated and in a helpless minority. Asquith's view was that the solution would be found in the characteristic British way of compromise after debate and argument. In this undoubtedly he failed to reckon with the Irish temperament, whether in the north or in the south, which regarded settlements of the British type as either surrenders or betrayals; but up to this time the very idea of organised resistance to an Act of Parliament had seemed to the great mass of people too remote to be seriously considered. Lord Randolph Churchill had said many years earlier that "Ulster would fight and Ulster would be right," and Orangemen had beaten their war-drums at their annual festivals, but no sober-minded Englishman had supposed that, when it came to the point, they would arm and drill to resist the will of Parliament, and still less that in so doing they would be supported and encouraged by one of the great British parties. It was these two things combined which determined the

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[1] Cabinet Letter to the King, 6th February, 1912.

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Age 59-60

sequel, and much of the exasperated feeling between British parties which had remained over from the conflicts of the previous years now found its vent in the Irish struggle.

II

The Home Rule Bill of 1912—the Home Rule Act of 1914—is one of the might-have-beens of British history, and it would be useless to dwell on the details of its passage through Parliament. Asquith introduced it on 11th April, and described it as "only the first step in a larger and more comprehensive policy" which would eventually give the other component parts of the United Kingdom the same freedom to deal with their local affairs, and thus release the Imperial Parliament to fulfil its duties to the whole country and to the Empire. Speaking of the existing Parliamentary conditions he said:

> "I do not exaggerate when I say that if you were to sit continuously during the whole twelve months of the year, and worked through them with unremitting ardour and assiduity, you would find at the end not only that there were still large arrears of legislation which you had not even attempted to overtake, not only enormous sums raised by taxation whose appropriation had never been discussed, but that there were vast areas of the Empire—I do not speak of the self-governing Dominions—for which we are still directly responsible as trustees, to whose concerns we had not been able to afford so much as one single night. . . . What we are doing now we should do with the distinct and direct purpose of these further and fuller applications of the principle. . . . Home Rule, in this larger sense, in my opinion, rests upon the necessities, is demanded by the responsibilities, and is indeed due to the honour of the Imperial Parliament."

The speech was an exposition in his most lucid and methodical manner of the principal contents of the Bill, and wound up with a passage which the veterans thought fit to compare with Mr. Gladstone's great perorations on the same theme:

> "We put this Bill forward as the responsible advisers of the Crown as the embodiment of our own honest and deliberate judgment. What is your alternative? Are you satisfied with the present system? Were you satisfied with it two years ago? What do you propose to put in its place? Have you any answer to the demand of Ireland beyond the naked veto of an irreconcilable minority and the promise of a freer and more copious outflow to Ireland of Imperial doles? There are at this moment between twenty and thirty self-governing Legislatures under the allegiance of the Crown. They have solved, under every diversity of conditions, economic, racial and religious, the problem of reconciling

IN DUBLIN

local autonomy with Imperial unity. Are we going to break up the Empire by adding one more? The claim comes this time, not from remote outlying quarters, but from a people close to our own doors, associated with us by every tie of kindred, of interest, of social and industrial intercourse, who have borne and are bearing their share, and a noble share it has been, in the building up and the holding together of the greatest Empire in history. That claim falls no longer on deaf ears. There has been reserved for this Parliament, this House of Commons, the double honour of reconciling Ireland and emancipating itself." (House of Commons, 11th April, 1912.)

Nationalist Ireland accepted the Bill at once as a great act of reconciliation. Mr. Redmond said:

> "We on these benches stand precisely where Parnell stood. We want peace with this country, and we deny that we are separatists. We say we are willing, as Parnell was willing, to accept a subordinate Parliament created by statute of this Imperial Legislature as a final settlement of Ireland's claim. . . .
>
> If I may say so reverently, I personally thank God that I have lived to see this day. I believe this Bill will pass into law. I believe it will result in the greater unity and strength of the Empire. I believe it will put an end once and for all to the wretched ill-will and suspicion and disaffection that have existed in Ireland and to the misunderstanding and suspicion that have existed between this country and Ireland. I believe it will have the effect of turning Ireland in time—it will take time—into a happy and prosperous country, with a united, loyal, and contented people." (House of Commons, 11th April, 1912.)

A few days later (23rd April) the National Convention met in Dublin, and the 8,000 delegates passed the following resolution, proposed by Mr. John Redmond and seconded by the Lord Mayor of Cork by acclamation:

> "That we welcome the Government of Ireland Bill as an honest and generous attempt to settle the long and disastrous quarrel between the British and Irish nations; and this National Convention of the Irish people decides to accept the Bill in the spirit in which it is offered; and we hereby declare our solemn conviction that the passage of this Bill into law will bind the people of Ireland to the people of Great Britain by a union infinitely closer than that which now exists, and by so doing add immeasurably to the strength of the Empire."

Thus in April 1912 the way seemed to be prepared for the final acceptance by Irish Nationalists of a subordinate Parliament with definite reservations and qualifications as the settlement of the "long and disastrous quarrel between the British and Irish nations."

III

1912
Age 59–60

Asquith had a brief breathing space towards the end of May, when he went with Mr. Churchill in the Admiralty yacht *Enchantress* on a visit to Malta. This time they stopped at Elba, and drove inland to see the villa where Napoleon lived before he escaped for the last Hundred Days in France. At Malta the time was largely occupied in "conclaves and conferences" on strategical questions, Kitchener having arrived specially from Egypt to take part in them. "I had a long and interesting *tête-à-tête* with Kitchener," he writes to his wife. "He is the only soldier with brains since Wolseley." The sirocco, that "hateful south wind laden with damp heat," blew incessantly over the island, but the sun shone and he was delighted with the beautiful country villa in which the Governor resided.

He returned to strenuous days in Parliament. The Home Rule Bill was fought at every stage in its passage through the House of Commons, and it was not until 16th January in the following year (1913) that it obtained a third reading (Majority 109, 467 to 358). A fortnight later (30th January) it met its expected fate in the House of Lords and was rejected on second reading after four days' debate (Majority 257, 326 to 69). All through the autumn and winter, the temperature had been rising both in Parliament and the country. On 13th November in the House of Commons there was a violent scene in which Ministers were assailed with cries of "traitor" from the opposite benches, and a prominent member of the Opposition threw the Speaker's copy of the Standing Orders at the head of Mr. Winston Churchill. More ominous still, the leader of the Opposition said the next day at a Unionist demonstration at the Albert Hall that "he had not tried to interfere with these proceedings on the part of his colleagues, and would never in similar circumstances think it his duty to do so" (14th November, 1912).

It was not, however, at Westminster but in Ireland that the most serious business was on foot. At the end of September 1911 the Ulster Unionist Council[1] had announced its intention to frame a constitution and set up a "Provisional Government" for the Province of Ulster as soon as a Home Rule Bill came into operation, and when Mr. Churchill went to Belfast in the following February to explain the Government policy, the Unionist organisers announced their intention of preventing him, "by force if necessary," from speaking in the hall which had been engaged for his meeting, and he was only able to speak, under military protection, in a marquee erected on a football ground. A defiant reply to Mr. Churchill came from Sir Edward Carson and Mr. Bonar Law at a counter demonstration in Belfast six weeks later (9th April), which Mr. Bonar Law described in his speech on the first reading of the Home Rule Bill in the House of Commons as "the expression of the soul of a people who were ready in what they believed to be the cause of justice and liberty to lay down their lives." From this time onwards civil war was openly threatened both by Ulstermen and by Unionist leaders and speakers in England. In July 1912 Asquith visited Dublin, where he received a great ovation. A suffragette threw a scythe into the open barouche in which Mrs. Asquith was riding with her husband and Mr. Redmond in a torchlight procession from the station, and cut Mr. Redmond on the ear, but he bore his wound with fortitude, and the Irish enthusiasm was undiminished. In his subsequent speech Asquith took serious notice of Mr. Bonar Law's threat, but expressed his entire disbelief in its being put into practice :

---

[1] Conference of Delegates of Ulster Unionist Council, Unionist Clubs of Ireland, etc. Belfast, 25th September, 1911.

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> "What I should like to know, who am also responsible as the leader, or one of the leaders, of a great political party, if I came here to Dublin to-night and, speaking to the people of Dublin, and not the people of Dublin only, because I am addressing a great many more here—What would be said of me if I were to come and say to you 'Since Ulster is opposed to Home Rule and Parliament' (and this might have been said a year ago when the House of Lords still retained its powers) 'is likely to give effect to the wishes of Ulster—in other words that four-fifths or three-fourths, the vast majority of Irish people, are to have their secular aspirations and wishes not only delayed but indefinitely frustrated and defeated because of the opposition of a minority—Gentlemen, are you going to stand it ?' Suppose I had talked at length about Pym and Hampden and the heroes of the American War of Independence, and of the great men in history who have fought for freedom and conquered their oppressors ! Suppose I had come and made such a speech as that, practically inciting a majority of the people of Ireland to resist what we think would have been the unjust position of the Imperial Parliament, what would have been said of me ? So long as we have Constitutional government, a power of convincing public opinion, and a free democratic suffrage, so long as the people can be convinced, and show, as in this case of Home Rule, that they are amenable to argument, and have a sense of justice, and are not going, however strong their prejudices or their indifference, to withstand the appeal of reason and freedom, so long as that is so, I find it very difficult to find any justification whatever for incitement to rebellion and civil war, and certainly no justification could be more flimsy or trivial than that urged in the case we are now considering. I am not, however, in the least embarrassed when asked, as I constantly am, 'What are you going to do in the event of civil war ?'

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I tell you quite frankly I do not believe in the prospect of a civil war. Minorities have their rights; they have not only their rights, but their susceptibilities, which ought to be considered and provided for. But to say that a minority, before any actual wrong has been or can be done to them, are, in defiance of the terms of the Act of Parliament and of the supreme authority of the Imperial Parliament, upon a suspicion or apprehension that they may peradventure at some future date be injured—to say that a minority is entitled on such grounds as that to thwart and defeat the Constitutional demand of a vast majority of their fellow-countrymen and to frustrate a great international settlement, is a proposition which, in my opinion, does not and never will commend itself to the conscience or to the judgment of the British people." (Dublin, 19th July.)

A week later Asquith was answered at a great Unionist demonstration at Blenheim (28th July), when Mr. Bonar Law said: "I can imagine no length of resistance to which Ulster will go in which I shall not be ready to support them." Fortified with this support, the Ulster Unionists now proceeded to the mass meetings which culminated (28th September) in the signing of the "Covenant" which pledged those who signed it to "use all means which may be found necessary to defeat the present conspiracy to set up a Home Rule Parliament in Ireland." Sir Edward Carson, who was the first to sign, and who now became the leader of the Ulster movement, had said a few weeks earlier that he intended, when he went over to Ireland, to "break every law that is possible,"[1] and Mr. F. E. Smith, who accompanied him, had announced that he would not shrink from the consequences "of his convictions, not though the whole fabric of the Commonwealth be convulsed."[2] Unionist newspapers claimed that the Covenant was signed by half a million male persons over sixteen, but it was pointed out that the entire male population of sixteen and over in the Province was only 574,000, and that of these at most only 328,000 were Protestants, if in that category was included every man or boy who was not a Catholic.

In the meantime there had been serious trouble in Belfast, and Mr. Birrell, the Chief Secretary, reported to the House that "outrages of a terrible character had been committed, and men who had been driven from the yards in an exhausted and even dying condition were attacked again. The result was that 2,000 Catholics and 500 Protestants had been compelled to leave the yards, not from lack of courage, but upon the friendly advice of their fellow-workmen who assured them that their lives would not be safe if they remained."

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[1] Speech at Criterion Restaurant, 24th June, 1912.

[2] Belfast, 8th July, 1912.

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But Belfast had always been notorious for anti-Catholic rioting, and the Nationalists whom Asquith consulted were convinced that if the Government showed no signs of weakening in its policy, these troubles would subside and the inevitable be accepted. Mr. Redmond was apparently unaware that as a result of this violence in the north, there was rising up behind him in the south a movement of extremists who thoroughly approved the Ulster method of defying a British Parliament and were beginning to contrast it with the meek acceptance of a subordinate Parliament by their own Parliamentary party. It was impossible that one side should appeal to force without evoking a physical force party on the other side, and when Ulster went on to proclaim a Provisional Government, and to arm and drill and import munitions for a force intended to resist Home Rule, South Ireland responded with a Provisional Committee in which Sinn Fein joined up with the Irish Republican Brotherhood and the Gaelic Associations to raise and arm "National Volunteers," with the double purpose of getting even with Ulster and exacting much more than Home Rule from the Imperial Government.

Settlement by compromise was now immensely more difficult since the one party threatened rebellion against the existing Bill, and the other party was beginning to demand something more than that Bill.

IV

So it continued all through 1913. Englishmen looked on amazed at the spectacle of Sir Edward Carson, a pillar of British Law, solemnly accepting office as head of a Provisional Government which was preparing to levy war on Parliament, and reviewing his forces with another distinguished lawyer, Mr. F. E. Smith, acting as aide-de-camp and galloper. To large numbers of the English, Ireland had always been an inscrutable enigma, and opinion was divided as to whether these performances were tragedy or *opera bouffe*. A good deal of the latter compounded with dangerous possibilities of the former was Asquith's judgment at this time, but he remained of opinion that not to treat it tragically was the best way of averting a tragic conclusion. He was, moreover, warned both by the Irish Nationalists and by his own independent advisers in Ireland that legal proceedings would certainly be abortive owing to the impossibility of getting juries to convict, and that to start them might easily join up North and South in a common resentment of British intervention in what was supposed to be an Irish quarrel. In spite of all appearances Irish Nationalists were still convinced that they understood their fellow-countrymen in Ulster a great deal better than Englishmen understood either of them, and declared their belief that if the Government would stand firm to their policy, and otherwise refrain from interference, they would find a way out of these troubles.

I was not of that opinion, and both at the time and in a book published eleven years later criticised the inaction of the Government with some severity. Asquith himself has replied to this criticism in a passage[1] which must be reproduced here :

> "The question arises whether the Government were right in not at once putting the Criminal Law in motion against Sir Edward Carson and his associates. Mr. Spender, whose judgment is entitled to great respect, has recently placed on record his considered opinion that we were wrong.[2]
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> 'The question (he writes) whether the Government could sustain its authority . . . should, I think, have been tested at the moment of challenge, for the granting of impunity to a prolonged threat of armed resistance and open preparation for it is deeply demoralising.' Of the truth of this last proposition there can be no doubt. Nor can there be much question that a case could have been made out—Sir Edward Carson himself never denied it—for bringing the proceedings in Ireland within the scope of the Criminal Law. The speeches, and the action taken upon them, were no longer—to quote language which I had used of Mr. Balfour twenty years before—'the conditional incitements of an academic anarchist.' As a rule, when people take to vapouring on the platform about the necessity of flouting Parliament, and resorting to 'direct action,' most sensible statesmen in these days would agree that they are best left alone. But here there was more than violent rhetoric ; there was abundant evidence of preparation being made for organised and forcible resistance to the law. Indeed, in the autumn of 1913, a 'Provisional Government' was actually formed in Belfast, and the 'Ulster Volunteer Force,' with an old Anglo-Indian General who had been appointed 'Commander-in-Chief' at its head, was 'reviewed' in the presence of Sir Edward Carson, who delivered to them an animated and stimulating address.
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> It had even been hinted that the British Army could not be relied on in the emergency of Civil War, and not only responsible British Unionists like Lord Selborne and Lord Derby, but Sir Edward Carson himself, felt bound to repudiate the suggestion. Speaking at Manchester (3rd December, 1913) he used this language : 'They tell us sometimes we are trying to tamper with the Army. It is a foul lie. . . . I have said before and say now that it would be a bad day for the country if the Army, under any circumstances, were to refuse to obey the lawful orders of those who are put in command over them. Of course they must. But it is for that

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[1] *Fifty Years of Parliament*, II, Chap. V., pp. 139–142.
[2] *The Public Life*, I ; p. 111.

very reason that statesmen and politicians ought to look ahead. It is for that very reason that statesmen and politicians ought to know to what their acts lead.' 1912 Age 59–60

This was sound doctrine, but undoubtedly during this campaign the seed had already been sown which germinated in the Curragh incident of the following year.

If, in view of all this, the Government abstained from criminal proceedings, it was neither from timidity nor from dilatoriness. Their adverse judgment, which, so far as I remember, was quite unanimous and never wavered, was based upon grounds of high policy, and I have never doubted that the course actually pursued, though it lent itself to every kind of cavil, was the wisest that could in the circumstances have been taken.

In the first place, it is never wise to set on foot the machinery of a State prosecution, if its failure to secure a conviction is a foregone conclusion. It would not have been at all difficult to draw up an indictment, or a series of alternative indictments, in respect of what had been said and done in Ireland. The charge or charges could have been framed so as to be technically water-tight, and they could have been proved up to the hilt by clear, and indeed, uncontroverted evidence. But the guilt or innocence of the accused would have ultimately had to be determined by a Jury, and, as the days of jury-packing were happily over, it was as certain as any of the sequences of nature that no Irish Jury would convict. The utmost that could be hoped for was a disagreement; an abortive result, which would have done nothing to vindicate the authority of the law.

This was in itself a fatal objection to the institution of criminal proceedings, even if it had not been reinforced by other grave considerations. We were working, through all these eventful years, in close co-operation and substantial harmony with the Leaders of the Nationalist Party. There was not, as yet, the faintest indication that they had lost their hold on the allegiance of the vast majority of their fellow-countrymen. I myself went to Dublin (18th July, 1912)—the first British Prime Minister to visit Ireland)—and I had abundant evidence not only of the unbroken enthusiasm of the people for Home Rule, but of their unabated confidence in Mr. Redmond and his colleagues, of whom the most influential at that time were Mr. Dillon and Mr. Devlin. They were, throughout, insistent in deprecating resort to criminal proceedings against the Carsonites, on the ground that such a step could do no good, and that it would inevitably secure for the victims an invaluable and much-coveted place in the annals of Irish martyrology.

There was a further argument which carried even greater weight. It was obviously of capital importance that, if it were possible, the birth of the new State should be under the star of Peace. Nothing, therefore, was more remote from our hopes or intentions than to take any step that was not absolutely forced upon us in the 'Coercion' of the Ulster minority. We could give no countenance to any claim on their part, moral or constitutional, to defeat or frustrate the aspirations, endorsed by the Imperial Parliament, of the vast majority of Irish people. But we appealed to them again and again in the course of the debates to

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formulate some plan which would meet their special case, without denying or delaying the claim of the majority.[1] For the moment, it is enough to say that any overtures in that direction, either upon the one side or the other, would have been hopeless from the first in the atmosphere which would have been created either by a successful or an unsuccessful resort to the Criminal Law."

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[1] For confirmation of this, see my speech in the House of Commons on the question that Clause 1 stand part of the Bill (3rd July, 1912); and Lord Crewe's in the House of Lords on the second reading (27th January, 1913).

CHAPTER XXX

THE ULSTER CHALLENGE

The position of the King—The advice of the Elder Statesmen—Asquith's memorandum—The King as bridge-builder—Conversations at Balmoral—Lord Crewe's report—Meeting between Asquith and Mr. Bonar Law—Interviews with Mr. John Redmond and Sir Edward Carson—A proposed settlement—Mr. Redmond's reluctant consent—Rejection by Unionist Leaders. J. A. S.

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In judging of what followed it is necessary to bear in mind Asquith's statement published in the last chapter. For the reasons given in it the Government were unanimous against starting legal proceedings against Sir Edward Carson and the Ulster leaders, which they believed would be abortive, and from the summer of 1913 onwards they looked for a solution to the isolation and settlement of the Ulster question through negotiation with the Opposition leaders. To this Asquith now set himself with his usual pertinacity.

The difficulties were great. Both parties were on high horses from which descent looked ignoble, and the Ulster threats were of a kind which made concession specially difficult on the part of the Government. The Nationalists were for the Bill and the whole Bill; the Unionists were still vehement that they wanted no Bill at all, and would make no accommodation for the sake of Ulster which would throw the Southern Unionists to the Nationalist wolves. To no one was the situation more anxious and distressing than to the King, who saw himself for the second time in his brief reign becoming the centre of a raging political quarrel, and almost certain to be drawn in, if it should spread to the army. He was being appealed to by hundreds of correspondents and advisers behind the scene to do something to save the situation, and most of the elder statesmen were now contributing their opinions about the possible action of the Crown within the limits of the Constitution. All strove to be impartial, but, as the records show, their views of what the Crown might do were generally in accord with what they wished it to do. Lord Lansdowne was strong on the theory that since the Parliament Act had destroyed the power hitherto inherent in the

House of Lords to kill a Bill and compel an election, that power now belonged to the Crown alone. He was convinced that the King would be acting constitutionally in either forcing a dissolution or requiring a referendum on the Home Rule Bill, and made light of the trouble threatened in South Ireland if it should be rejected. The proposed contracting out for Ulster he declared to be "absurd and impracticable."

Mr. Balfour made a characteristic distinction between two cases: (1) in which the King was opposed to his Ministers, and (2) in which though impartial or even agreeing with his Ministers he yet thought that the country should be consulted. In the second case he would be on safe ground, if he insisted on an election; in the first not. The Home Rule Bill could, he and others thought, be brought under the second category, and if the King addressed a letter to his subjects explaining the ground on which he took action and his readiness to abide by the result, he would, it was suggested, suffer no damage, whatever that result might be.

Mr. Bonar Law had no doubt that the King had the right to dismiss his present Ministers and appoint others, who would accept the responsibility of advising him differently, and that acting on the advice of these new Ministers he could dissolve Parliament, so that the wishes of his people could be clearly ascertained. But he said frankly that whatever course he took, the King could not avoid personal responsibility and the risks attaching to it. It was an open question, he thought, whether greater permanent harm would be done to the monarchy by an attack from the extreme supporters of the Government or by the bitter and lasting resentment of the people of Ulster and those who sympathised with them. Mr. Bonar Law drew a dark picture of what would happen if the Government attempted to use the army in Ireland before they had behind them the moral force which could be secured by the support of the electors. He warned the King that the leaders of the Unionist Party had pledged themselves to give every possible support to Ulster, and he doubted if, in that case, the army would obey the orders of the Government. If the election went against them the Unionist Party would not support or encourage the resistance of Ulster; if it went in their favour, they would at once bring in a Bill to reduce the number of Irish members in the Imperial Parliament to about one half of what it was at that time, and then, he said, "we shall hear no more of Home Rule."

Lord Rosebery thought that declining the Royal assent to the Home Rule Bill would be unconstitutional and a *coup d'état*. The

King, he said, incurred no personal responsibility in assenting to a Bill passed by Parliament. He advised that the King should urge a Conference to procure a settlement "which would not indeed satisfy Ulster, for that would be impossible, but which would satisfy the conscience both of Ulster and Great Britain." Should that fail, the King should send the Government a minute explaining his position and its difficulties and demand a formal reply in a written document.

Asquith was quite clear that, however it might be wrapped up, either the refusal of the Royal assent to the Home Rule Bill or the dismissal of Ministers, would be as dangerous to the Crown as the rejection of the Budget had been to the House of Lords. It was precisely the claim of the Peers to possess the right of dissolving Parliament which had been rejected in December 1910, and nothing in his opinion could be more undesirable than that the same claim should now be made by the Crown and put to the test at another election. The Peers too had endeavoured to explain that they took action only that the wishes of the country might be ascertained, but this had not availed to save them from the consequences. If the Crown should succeed to the powers which had been taken from the House of Lords, it would be called upon to intervene, not in one case only, but in all cases in which party strife ran to extremes. There were already counsellors who urged that the Welsh Disestablishment Bill should be joined with the Home Rule Bill as a proper object for the refusal of the Royal assent. Asquith pointed out that if the King acted on the prompting of a Conservative Opposition in a Liberal Parliament, a Liberal and Radical Opposition would certainly expect him to take similar action in a Conservative Parliament, and his impartiality be brought into question, if he refused. Looking down this vista, Asquith saw nothing but trouble and danger for the Sovereign, supposing democratic institutions to have any permanence in the country. An elective President might exercise a political veto, but not a Constitutional Sovereign.

The argument went on all though the winter of 1913 and the first six months of 1914. All this time eminent and well-meaning counsellors continued to pour in their advice upon the King, and some went to the length of drafting proclamations in which he was supposed to appeal to his people to support him in taking exceptional action to save them from Civil War. Referendum, dismissal of Ministers, refusal of the Royal assent, delay of the Royal assent, so that an election might take place between the passing of the Bill and its becoming law—all these and sundry other specifics found advocates among those who thought anything preferable to the passing of the Bill. In March the daring suggestion was made that the Peers should reject the Army Annual Bill, which would indeed have deprived the Government of the use of the Army in Ireland, but by the same stroke have disbanded all the forces of the Crown all over the Empire. Asquith was warned that this project was being seriously considered by certain of the Unionist leaders, but was able to bring influences to bear which caused it to be stillborn.

The King listened patiently to many voices, and nothing could be farther from the truth than the story repeated in after days that he lost his self-control and threatened to abdicate. He remained cool and wise through it all, and was neither to be persuaded that he had no responsibility nor rushed into precipitate action. On any construction whatever of his constitutional position he held his responsibility to be great and unescapable; and he sometimes reminded his Ministers that whereas the Government would in due course disappear, he would remain and his action be remembered. Month after month he persisted in his efforts to induce the irreconcilables to see reason, begging each in turn to moderate their language, and to make more generous allowance for each other's difficulties. If in the end the controversy was narrowed down to the question of the area to be excluded and the conditions of its exclusion, it was largely by his efforts. Asquith never for one moment made light of the King's responsibility, but to those who said that the King must not be associated with Civil War, he replied that it was of equal importance that he should not be associated with rebellion. Patience and again patience was his counsel—patience and unremitting effort to bridge what remained of the gap, or to make it so small that recourse to civil war for the drawing of the Ulster boundary or the difference between an option to stay out and an option to come in would be a manifest absurdity.

Apart from the constitutional objection to a forcible dissolution of Parliament or other exceptional action by the Crown Asquith saw no prospect of settlement and pacification in any of the ways suggested. The utmost that the Unionist leaders could be induced to say in proposing an election was that if it went against them, they would cease to countenance and support the forcible resistance of Ulster. They could give no guarantee that Ulster would submit; and Ulster, when appealed to, stubbornly maintained that its relation to the Crown was a contract which could not be varied except with its consent, which in no way depended on the fiat of

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the electorate. It was extremely improbable in Asquith's opinion that this situation would be eased, or the conscientious objections of British sympathisers be removed by a heated election, and not at all unlikely that fresh passions would be aroused. As to the Unionist estimate of the consequences of the rejection of the Home Rule Bill—Lord Lansdowne's belief that it would cause no serious trouble in South Ireland, Mr. Bonar Law's idea that if the number of Irish members were reduced by half in the Imperial Parliament, no more would be heard of Home Rule—Asquith thought them all dangerous illusions, as indeed the sequel was to prove. The extent to which Sinn Fein was boiling up in reaction to the Ulster movement was rather under- than over-estimated by Asquith and the Irish leaders, but he was convinced that the problem which would confront a Unionist Government in South Ireland in the event of Home Rule being rejected, would be quite as difficult and dangerous as that which would confront a Liberal Government in Ulster in the event of its being passed. For these reasons the suggestion that he should absolve the King by resigning and making way for a Minister who would advise a dissolution seemed to him a counsel of despair, which offered no way out either for the country or for the Crown.

II

Asquith's own views at this time are clearly stated in two Memoranda which he drew up in the first fortnight of September 1913 :

The Constitutional Position of the Sovereign.

"I propose to deal in this memorandum with the position of a Constitutional Sovereign in relation to the controversies which are likely to arise with regard to the Government of Ireland Bill. In a subsequent paper I will deal (1) with the actual and prospective situation in Ireland in the event of (*a*) the passing, (*b*) the rejection of that Bill ; and (2) with the possibility and expediency of some middle course.

In the old days, before our present Constitution was completely evolved, the Crown was a real and effective, and often a dominating factor in legislation. Its powers were developed to considerable lengths by such kings as Henry VIII, and enforced with much suppleness and reserve by Queen Elizabeth ; but the Tudor Sovereigns had a keen eye and a responsive pulse to the general opinion of the nation. The Stuarts, who followed, pushed matters to extremes, with the result that Charles I lost his head, and James II his throne. The Revolution put the title to the Throne and its prerogative on a Parliamentary basis, and since a comparatively early date in the reign of Queen Anne, the Sovereign has never attempted to withhold his assent from a Bill which had received Parliamentary sanction.

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We have had, since that date, Sovereigns of marked individuality, of great authority, and of strong ideas (often from time to time, opposed to the policy of the Ministry of the day) but none of them—not even George III, Queen Victoria or King Edward VII—have ever dreamt of reviving the ancient veto of the Crown. We have now a well-established tradition of 200 years, that, in the last resort, the occupant of the Throne accepts and acts upon the advice of his Ministers. The Sovereign may have lost something of his personal power and authority, but the Crown has been thereby removed from the storms and vicissitudes of party politics, and the monarchy rests upon a solid foundation which is buttressed both by long tradition and by the general conviction that its personal status is an invaluable safeguard for the continuity of our national life.

It follows that the rights and duties of a constitutional monarch in this country in regard to legislation are confined within determined and strictly circumscribed limits. He is entitled and bound to give his Ministers all relevant information which comes to him; to point out objections which seem to him valid against the course which they advise; to suggest (if he thinks fit) an alternative policy. Such intimations are always received by Ministers with the utmost respect, and considered with more care and deference than if they proceeded from any other quarter. But in the end, the Sovereign always acts upon the advice which Ministers, after full deliberation and (if need be) reconsideration, feel it their duty to offer. They give that advice well knowing that they can, and probably will, be called to account for it by Parliament.

The Sovereign undoubtedly has the power of changing his advisers, but it is relevant to point out that there has been, during the last 130 years, one occasion only on which the King has dismissed the Ministry which still possessed the confidence of the House of Commons. This was in 1834, when William IV (one of the least wise of British monarchs) called upon Lord Melbourne to resign. He took advantage (as we now know) of a hint improvidently given by Lord Melbourne himself, but the proceedings were neither well advised nor fortunate. The dissolution which followed left Sir R. Peel in a minority, and Lord Melbourne and his friends in a few months returned to power, which they held for the next six years. The authority of the Crown was disparaged, and Queen Victoria, during her long reign, was careful never to repeat the mistake of her predecessor.

The Parliament Act was not intended in any way to affect, and it is submitted has not affected, the Constitutional position of the Sovereign. It deals only with differences between the two Houses. When the two Houses are in agreement (as is always the case when there is a Conservative majority in the House of Commons), the Act is a dead letter. When they differ, it provides that, after a considerable interval, the thrice repeated decision of the Commons shall prevail, without the necessity for a dissolution of Parliament. The possibility of abuse is guarded against by the curtailment of the maximum life of any given House of Commons to five years.

Nothing can be more important, in the best interests of the Crown and of the country, than that a practice, so long established and so well justified by experience, should remain unimpaired. It frees the occupant of the Throne from all personal responsibility for the Acts of the Executive and the legislature. It gives force and meaning to the old maxim that 'the King can do no wrong.' So long as it prevails, however objectionable particular Acts may be to a large section of his subjects, they cannot hold him in any way accountable, and their loyalty is (or ought to be) wholly unaffected. If, on the other hand, the King were to intervene on one side, or in one case—which he could only do by dismissing Ministers in *de facto* possession of a Parliamentary majority—he would be expected to do the same on another occasion, and perhaps for the other side. Every Act of Parliament of the first order of importance, and only passed after acute controversy, would be regarded as bearing the personal *imprimatur* of the Sovereign. He would, whether he wished it or not, be dragged into the arena of party politics; and at a dissolution following such a dismissal of Ministers as has just been referred to, it is no exaggeration to say that the Crown would become the football of contending factions.

This is a Constitutional catastrophe which it is the duty of every wise statesman to do the utmost in his power to avert.

H. H. A.

September 1913."

This he followed up later with a second Memorandum dealing with the Irish situation, as it appeared in the autumn of 1913:

"I proceed to consider the prospective situation in Ireland in the event of the passing or of the rejection of the Bill.

If the Bill becomes law (whether or not its passing is preceded by another general election) there will undoubtedly be a serious danger of organised disorder in the four north-eastern counties of Ulster. It is, in my opinion, a misuse of terms to speak of what is likely to happen as Civil War. The total population of the area concerned is little over 1,000,000. It is divided between Protestants and Roman Catholics—and in that part of the world political and religious differences roughly coincide—in the proportion of seven to three (Protestants 729,624, Roman Catholics 316,406). In two of the four counties (Armagh and Londonderry) the Protestant preponderance is not greater than six to five. It is not, therefore, the case of a homogeneous people resisting a change to which they are unitedly opposed. On the contrary, there will be a considerable and a militant minority strongly in favour of the new state of things, and ready to render active assistance to the forces of the executive. In the remainder of Ulster, and in the three other provinces of Ireland, there will be an overwhelming majority of the population on that side of the law.

But, while anxious that things should be seen in their true perspective, I have not the least disposition to minimise the gravity of the situation which will probably arise. The importation of rifles has, so far, been on a small scale, and the drilling and training of volunteers, though it is no doubt accustoming numbers of men to act together, to obey orders, and to develop *esprit de corps*, is not likely to produce a body which can stand up against regular troops. But the genuine apprehensions of a large majority of the Protestants, the incitements of responsible leaders,

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and the hopes of British sympathy and support, are likely to encourage forcible resistance (wherever it can be tried); there is the certainty of tumult and riot, and more than the possibility of bloodshed.

On the other hand, if the Bill is rejected or indefinitely postponed, or some inadequate and disappointing substitute put forward in its place, the prospect is, in my opinion, much more grave. The attainment of Home Rule has for more than 30 years been the political (as distinguished from the agrarian) ideal of four-fifths of the Irish people. Whatever happens in other parts of the United Kingdom, at successive general elections, the Irish representation in Parliament never varies. For the last eight years they have had with them a substantial majority of the elected representatives of Great Britain. The Parliament of 1906 was debarred by election pledges from dealing with the matter legislatively, but during its lifetime, in 1908, the House of Commons affirmed by an overwhelming majority a resolution in favour of the principle. In the present Parliament, the Government of Ireland Bill has passed that House in two successive sessions, with British majorities which showed no sign of diminution from first to last. If it had been taken up by a Conservative Government, it would more than a year ago have been the law of the land. It is the confident expectation of the vast bulk of the Irish people that it will become law next year.

If the ship, after so many stormy voyages, were now to be wrecked in sight of port, it is difficult to overrate the shock, or its consequences. They would extend into every department of political, social, agrarian and domestic life. It is not too much to say that Ireland would become ungovernable—unless by the application of forces and methods which would offend the conscience of Great Britain, and arouse the deepest resentment in all the self-governing Dominions of the Crown.

It follows, from what has been said above, that while in my opinion—from the point of view of social order—the consequences of the passing of the Bill would be unquestionably less serious than those of its rejection, yet no forecast, in either event, can be free from anxiety. Any practicable means of mitigation—still more, of escape—deserves, therefore (whencesoever it is suggested), impartial and mature consideration.

The demand, put forward recently by Mr. Balfour, for a General Election, between now and the beginning of next session, is open to objections of the most formidable character. (1) If such an election resulted in a majority for the Government, and the consequent passing of the Irish Bill next session, the recalcitrance of North-East Ulster would not in any way be affected. Sir E. Carson, and his friends have told the world, with obvious sincerity, that their objections to Home Rule have nothing to do with the question whether it is approved or disapproved by the British electorate. It is true that the Unionist Leaders in Great Britain have intimated that, in such an event, they would not give 'active countenance' (whatever that may mean) to the defiance of the law. But what effect can that have on men who have been encouraged to believe, and many of them do believe, that under Home Rule their liberties and their religion would be in jeopardy? (2) If the election resulted in a Government defeat, the circumstances are such that neither in Ireland nor in Great Britain would it be accepted as a verdict adverse

H. H. A. WITH SIR JAMES LOW AT SIR JAMES' RESIDENCE IN EAST FIFE

to Home Rule. There may not be much active enthusiasm for Home Rule in the British constituencies, but the evidence afforded, not only by the steady and persistent majorities in the House of Commons, but by the bye-elections, tends to show that (at the lowest) it meets with acquiescence as an inevitable necessity in itself, and as a first step towards further devolution. All the most trustworthy observers agree that, even where the bye-elections have gone against the Government, the attempt (wherever made) to arouse interest and resentment by pushing to the forefront the case against Home Rule and the supposed wrongs of Ulster, has met with no success. The General Election would be fought, as the bye-elections have been, not predominantly on Home Rule, but on the Insurance Act, the Marconi contract, and a score of other 'issues' which happened for the moment to preoccupy public attention. (3) The concession of the demand for a General Election, at this stage, would be in the teeth of the intentions of the Parliament Act. One of the primary and most clearly avowed purposes of that Act was to abrogate the power of the House of Lords to force a dissolution. The assumption which underlies the whole measure is, that a Bill which can survive the ordeal of three sessions, prolonged over two years, in the House of Commons, ought without the need of another election, to pass into law.

It is quite another matter to suggest that, after the Bill has passed, a General Election should take place before it has come into active operation. Parliament will then have completed, or nearly completed, four out of its possible five years; and if the country were either on general or particular grounds averse to the Government, the new Parliament would consider, before anything irreparable has been done, whether to repeal or to amend the Irish Government Act. If, moreover, it were known beforehand that this would happen, any outburst of disorder in Ulster would everywhere be regarded as premature and inexcusable.

There remains the proposal, to which Lord Loreburn has during the last week given his authority, for settlement by Conference. I wrote to Lord Loreburn, as soon as I read his letter in the *Times*[1] to ask him to tell me precisely what he meant. I expressed sympathy with the spirit of all that he had written, and acquiescence in the reasoning of much, though not the whole, of his argument. But I pointed out that the parties concerned in this controversy, including Sir E. Carson and Mr. Redmond, are not likely, at the moment, to accept an invitation (from any quarter) to come into a room and sit round a table, for the purpose of talking in the air about the Government of Ireland, or about Federalism and Devolution. It is no good blinding one's eye to obvious and undeniable facts, and one of those facts, relevant to the present case, undoubtedly is, that there is a deep and hitherto unbridgeable chasm of *principle* between the supporters and the opponents of Home Rule. It is a question not of phraseology but of substance. Four-fifths of Ireland, with the support of a substantial British majority in the present and late House of Commons, will be content with nothing less than a subordinate legislature with a local executive responsible to it. They insist, moreover, that (whatever may be done with Devolution elsewhere) the claim of Ireland is peculiar, and paramount in point of time and urgency. A settlement which ignored these conditions would be no settlement at all. But within these conditions—so I said to Lord Loreburn—there is (so far as I am concerned) no point—finance, Ulster, Second Chamber, representation of minorities, etc., upon which I am not ready and anxious to enter into conference, and to yield to any reasonable suggestion.

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[1] *Times*, 11th September, 1913.

For a Conference to be fruitful, there must be some definite basis upon and from which its deliberations can proceed. I fear that at present (it may be different nearer the time) no such basis can be found. I shall be only too glad if that fear can now or hereafter be satisfactorily dispelled.

I feel bound to add, that after the experience of 1910, when there was on both sides perfect goodwill and a sincere desire for agreement, that an abortive Conference would be likely to widen differences and embitter feeling.

H. H. A."

III

During the autumn of 1913, the King, pursuing his task of bridge-building, invited important men on both sides to Balmoral and encouraged them to speak frankly to one another. Thus in September Lord Crewe found himself playing golf with Mr. Bonar Law on Deeside, and in the evenings had long and friendly talks with him. On this neutral territory Mr. Bonar Law proved to be not quite the fire-eater that he appeared to be in the House of Commons and on public platforms. But when he spoke about Ulster and the Unionist plans he abated nothing. On the passing of the Home Rule Bill, Sir Edward Carson was to set up his provisional Government, to take definite action usurping the function of police and courts which would compel the armed intervention of troops, and the Opposition would at the worst go all lengths and be ultimately driven out of the House of Commons. They believed that the army would not obey, and that a situation would be created in which a dissolution would be forced in one way or another. But while he contemplated this "at the worst," Mr. Bonar Law was clear that it would be a catastrophe for the country, and he intimated that he was in favour of a Conference between the leaders of British parties—Sir Edward Carson and Mr. Redmond being left out—on the basis of excluding Ulster and granting Home Rule to the rest of Ireland. He was even ready, he hinted, to consider the possibility of a Federal scheme of Home Rule all round with an Imperial Parliament on top, which might meet the Ulster objection to being cut off from the Imperial Parliament, and take in its sweep the vexed question of second-chamber reform. This was the first serious intimation that the Unionist Party might waive its objection to Home Rule for the rest of Ireland, if Ulster were treated separately.[1]

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[1] Letter from Lord Crewe to Asquith.

Asquith himself was at Balmoral on 8th October, 1913, and with the King's hearty approval wrote confidentially to Mr. Bonar Law, suggesting that they should meet. Meet they did, with elaborate precautions for secrecy, at Sir Max Aitken's house, near Leatherhead, on 14th October, and the first meeting was followed by a second. Asquith has left pencilled notes of their conversations from which it appears that the atmosphere was friendly, and that there was no difficulty about general propositions. Mr. Bonar Law now seemed less certain that the rejection of the Home Rule would lead to no serious consequences. Indeed the two men were now agreed that almost insuperable difficulties lay ahead of both parties, if settlements could not be reached, the one being faced with the coercion of Ulster, and the other (if it should return to power after a general election) with the coercion of the rest of Ireland. But neither was sure how far he could carry his own party, or his Irish allies, and, as soon as that ground was explored, the gulf began to widen. Mr. Bonar Law's proposal was the permanent exclusion of the four north-east counties "plus perhaps Tyrone and one other," with an option of inclusion at some later date, if these counties so decided. But he was doubtful whether Lord Lansdowne, who thought that North and South should sink or swim together, and held strong views about deserting the Southern loyalists, would consent to this; and Asquith was certain that the Nationalists would not. The various permutations and combinations of the Ulster exclusion plan—inclusion at the beginning with an option to go out after *x* years, the ultimate decision to be by the Imperial Parliament; exclusion at the beginning and the ultimate decision to be by the people of Ulster, etc., etc.—were opened up, but exploring on this ground gave very discouraging results. There was evidently at that moment no plan which had the least chance of being accepted by both the Irish parties, even if the British leaders consented to it. Asquith's conclusion was that, so long as this temper lasted, a Conference such as Lord Loreburn had suggested in a letter to the *Times* would only make bad worse.

On 6th November, he saw Mr. Bonar Law again, and once more they went over the ground. Both men agreed that opinion was stiffening, and that ideas of compromise and even conference were regarded with disfavour and suspicion by both their parties. Mr. Bonar Law broached the idea of a General Election before the beginning of the next session. Asquith thought it the worst possible solution, if an agreed settlement were desired. Mr. Bonar Law admitted that the best he hoped for from an election was a balance

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of parties, but that he thought would make compromise inevitable. Asquith rejoined that compromise would be even more difficult after all the bad blood of an embittered election. Asquith explained his difficulties with the Irish Party; Mr. Bonar Law replied frankly that "he was not sure that his were not even greater; he had to reckon not only with Carsonism (as distinguished from Carson himself) but with the probable revival of a die-hard movement among the English Unionists." The discussion passed again to the exclusion of Ulster, and Mr. Bonar Law repudiated the idea of immediate inclusion with an option for exclusion. Carson, he said, would hold out in the first instance for the exclusion of the whole Province, to which Asquith replied "out of the question." In Donegal, Monaghan, and Cavan, Nationalists were in overwhelming preponderance; and in Tyrone and Fermanagh there was a fairly even balance. The talk ended with Mr. Bonar Law pressing for the inclusion of Tyrone and Fermanagh in the excluded area. "We parted in good will," says Asquith, "but in no very sanguine spirit." In *Memories and Reflections* Asquith has quoted some examples which tickled his fancy of Mr. Bonar Law's highly seasoned rhetoric, but after seeing him privately he judged him to be by nature a kindly and peaceable man, who was a reluctant and a conscientious fire-eater in public.

The next recorded interview was with Mr. John Redmond on 17th November. Asquith broached the plan of excluding "Ulster as defined" by county option for a definite period, say five or six years, and after that automatic inclusion. The answer was not encouraging. Mr. Redmond "could conceive of no proposal which would array against it a more compact and united body of sentiment in Ireland, both Nationalist and Unionist." If it were put forward at the last moment by Mr. Bonar Law as the price of an agreed settlement, he might look at it; otherwise he would not entertain it for a moment. It would split his party into halves, and at the outside they could only abstain from voting against it. Mr. Redmond's idea was to give Ulster (as defined) administrative autonomy, including a local Council with by-law-making powers, additional representation in the Irish House of Commons and substantial further power by increasing the number and authority of the Senate ("Home Rule within Home Rule").

On 10th December, Asquith saw Mr. Bonar Law for the third time, and found him highly pessimistic. He took the gloomiest view, not only of the extremists, but of the rank and file of both parties. Asquith now broached "the Federal solution"—Home

Rule all round with an Imperial Parliament over all, but Mr. Bonar Law was now sure that there was no solution that way, and held out for the definite exclusion of the specified area with option to come in later.

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Last of all on 16th December, Asquith saw Sir Edward Carson, whom, unexpectedly, he found "on the whole less pessimistic." Sir Edward dwelt on the need of a real settlement which would not be followed by continued agitation. He suggested that the specified Ulster counties should be excluded until the Imperial Parliament should otherwise determine in pursuance of some general scheme of devolution. The interview ended on that, but on 23rd December, Asquith appears to have written to Sir Edward proposing on his own responsibility that "no legislation in the Irish Parliament on any matter of importance should become effective in the Ulster area against the will of a majority of Ulster representatives unless submitted to and approved by the Imperial Parliament." This seems to have made no impression, for on 22nd January, 1914, Asquith reported to the Cabinet that he had received a letter from Sir Edward Carson "flatly refusing anything short of the exclusion of Ulster."

Nevertheless some progress had been made. The ground had been shifted from opposition to any sort of Home Rule to Home Rule on the basis of excluding a part of Ulster, yet to be defined, either temporarily or permanently. The Cabinet were unanimous that this amount of progress should be reported to the country as soon as possible, and an amendment which might form the basis of further negotiations be presented to the House of Commons. Mr. Lloyd George and Mr. Birrell now took up the negotiations with the Nationalist leaders, and on 4th March reported to the Cabinet that "these leaders had been reluctantly persuaded as the price of a peaceful settlement" to agree to the plan of giving the Ulster counties (before the Bill came into operation) the right by plebiscite of excluding themselves for a term of years. In a letter to Asquith confirming this, Mr. Redmond said:

> "All that we can be expected to do is to give our acquiescence to the solution as the price of peace, to undertake that we will use our influence to get the solution a fair hearing from our people, and to recommend it to them as worth making for the sake of a settlement by agreement; and then to leave to the Opposition the full responsibility of accepting or rejecting it."

The advantages of this plan were, as Asquith stated to the King, that it did not require the recasting of the Bill, that it gave time for a

General Election after both Irish and British electors had seen Home Rule in the working, and that it " deprived of all justification anything in the nature of forcible resistance " since " the people of Ulster could get by the ballot box, without any resort to arms, exclusion, if they desired it."

Accordingly on 9th March, 1914, when the Bill was presented for second reading on the third and last occasion under the Parliament Act, Asquith announced his intention of proposing an amendment giving the Ulster counties the right to vote themselves out for a period of six years.

The result was disappointing so far as the Ulstermen and their British associates were concerned. It was not enough for these that the decision should be postponed—that there should, as Asquith explained, be two General Elections in the United Kingdom before Ulster could be required to come in. This, in Sir Edward Carson's words, was " sentence of death with a stay of execution for six years." The Ulstermen repeated that they would in no circumstances accept Home Rule, and that they were not prepared to submit their case to the judgment of the United Kingdom. They regarded the Act of Union as a contract which could not be varied except with their consent. Yet the amendment had some effect, for it narrowed the problem to the exclusion of Ulster, or that part of it which could be marked off as definitely Protestant and anti-Nationalist. " Give us a clean cut or come and fight us " was now Sir Edward Carson's cry. This meant that Ulster, and presumably the Unionist Party, would concede Home Rule for the rest of Ireland, if there could be agreement about the area to be marked off, and the conditions of its exclusion.

CHAPTER XXXI

IRELAND AND THE ARMY

A heated atmosphere—The appeal to the Army—Sir Henry Wilson working from within—Blunders at the War Office—An Ulster test for officers—Instructions from the Cabinet—The Curragh incident—A challenge to the officers—Asquith's action—Becomes Secretary for War—The misunderstanding at Whitehall—Wild rumours—The debate in the House of Commons. J. A. S.

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It is difficult to believe that, if the British people or the people of Ulster had realised how nearly the leaders of parties had come to agreement in their private conferences, the course of events could have been what it was in the next few weeks. All sorts of causes have been held to justify rebellion—intolerable suffering, long-lasting oppression, the threats to life and liberty of an *instans tyrannus*—but the cause of Ulster fell into none of these categories, and by the beginning of March 1914 it had been fined down to a question of the period for which, and the area in which, exclusion should be granted to those who objected to Home Rule. These might be very difficult questions, but they were not questions for which British citizens in a normal state of mind fly to civil war.

But by this time hardly anyone associated with the Irish question was in a normal state of mind. Forces had been set in motion which were beyond control by argument or reason. Politicians might speak the language of reason behind the scenes, but on platforms and in the House of Commons they appealed only to passion, and between them had created an atmosphere in which every concession or accommodation appeared to their fervid supporters as either a surrender or a betrayal. More and more it was being said that the army would decide, the army which, in the last resort, might have to be invoked against the Ulster Covenanters.

This raised the most serious question of all. The army, though technically railed off from politics, consisted of human beings who could not be isolated from the violent controversies of these years, and least of all when eminent politicians were daily proclaiming that they were to play the decisive part. Sir Edward Carson might say as he did that it was a gross libel to charge him with seducing the army, but when he was planning a course of action which must in the end require the intervention of the army, and when Unionist policy was being built up on the assumption that the army would not act if called upon, it was inevitable that soldiers all over the country should begin to ask to whom they owed allegiance—to the King, to Parliament, to the Government, to their own conscience or judgment on the merits of the policy which the Government was proposing?

Small wonder if this question was being hotly debated in officers' messes and barracks, or if the more quixotically-minded began to think it their duty to give effect to their political convictions at the sacrifice of their careers. Disquieting reports about discipline reached the War Office from many quarters during the summer and autumn of 1913, but there was one fact of which both the Secretary of State and the Army Council seem to have been unaware. This was that unrest in the army was being actively fomented from within the War Office itself by one of its own principal officials, Sir Henry Wilson, the Director of Military Operations, who was a passionate partisan of Ulster, and who appeared to think all things lawful in his warfare against the Government he was serving. The activities of this official during these critical months could not easily have been believed, if they had not been written down in his own Diary with his own hand. This Diary[1] shows him to have been in constant and intimate association both with the Ulster leaders and with the leaders of the Unionist Party in London. He relates that on 13th March, 1913, he had seen an officer from Ulster visiting London "on deputation to Bonar Law," who had told him "of the plans for the North, of the 25,000 armed men to act as citadel, and the 100,000 men to act as constables, the arrangements for the banks, railways, etc., election, provisional government, and so on," and all these he had found "very sensible." At the end of January he visited Ulster, and entered in his diary, "The arrangements of the Ulster army are well advanced, and there is no doubt of the discipline and spirit of men and officers. I must come over later and see the troops at work." Early in March he reports himself as having had an hour's talk with Mr. Bonar Law, and having been convinced by him that "desperate measures are required to save a desperate situation"; and a few days later as having dined in company with Lord Milner, Dr. Jameson, and Sir Edward Carson to discuss the Ulster situation. It never seems to have occurred to

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[1] *Field-Marshal Sir Henry Wilson*, by Maj.-Genl. Sir C. E. Callwell, K.C.B., Vol. I, Chaps. VIII and IX.

Sir Henry Wilson or to his hosts and confidants that, holding a high official position, he had duties to the Government which made it improper for him to render these services to opponents who were preparing forcible resistance to it; and still less that the foreign situation which he constantly described as highly menacing made it specially his duty to maintain discipline and banish the thought of civil strife.

But with this restless and fiery spirit at work within, and the constant assertion on public platforms and in newspapers that the soldiers would never permit themselves to be used to coerce Ulster, it is scarcely surprising that the handling of the army by its superiors should have been nervous and fumbling, or that the War Office should have become the scene of the distracted counsels described in Sir Henry Wilson's Diary. Blunder now followed upon blunder. Early in December 1913 the Chief of the Imperial General Staff and the Adjutant-General represented to the Secretary of State that "so many efforts were being made to seduce officers and men from their allegiance that there was a real danger of indiscipline in the army." Thereupon Colonel Seely (who had succeeded Lord Haldane as Secretary for War in 1912) summoned the G.O.C.'s in England, Scotland, and Ireland to a conference at the War Office on 16th December, and while assuring them that the Government had "no intention of giving outrageous and illegal orders to the troops," and that there would be "no question of enforcing the Home Rule Act on Ulster by force of arms for years to come, and indeed such an event would probably never happen," yet said that the possibility had to be faced of "action being required by H.M.'s troops in supporting the civil power and in protecting life and property when the police were unable to hold their own." From the moment such explanations had to be made, the ground became precarious, and a fatal mistake was made when Sir Arthur Paget, the Commander-in-Chief in Ireland, obtained from the Secretary of State the concession that officers domiciled in Ulster should be permitted to "disappear" without prejudice to their prospects or promotion afterwards, if the army was called upon to deal with disturbances caused by the Ulster volunteers. To give the Commander-in-Chief a discretionary power to deal with special hard cases would have been one thing, but to create an Ulster test for the army serving in Ireland was, as the event proved, a quite different and very dangerous thing.

II

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Early in March 1914 Asquith reported to the Cabinet that according to police reports from Ireland there was a possibility that the Ulster volunteers would attempt to seize by a *coup de main* certain police and military barracks and depots of arms and ammunition. A committee, consisting of Lord Crewe, Mr. Birrell, Mr. Winston Churchill and Colonel Seely, was appointed to look into the matter and report to the Cabinet without delay. On 7th March the committee reported that they had come to the conclusion that the depots of arms and ammunition at Armagh, Omagh, Enniskillen, and Carrickfergus might easily be rushed, and that instructions had been given by the War Office to have these places adequately protected by armed guards. At the same time Mr. Churchill "stated that the forthcoming practice of the 1st Battle Squadron would take place at Lamlash"; that "the Admiral commanding in Irish waters had already taken precautions for the protection of coastguard stations"; "that a cruiser would be stationed at or near Carrickfergus, and two or three destroyers sent to the South of Ireland." It was also "resolved as a precautionary measure that the constabulary in the Province of Ulster who were scattered in very small detachments over the countryside should be placed under the authority of a single commanding officer at Belfast, and that arrangements should be made that, upon the necessity arising, they should forthwith concentrate at five or six important centres to be determined after consultation with the military authorities."

In view of what followed it is important to bear in mind the origin of these instructions and the precise words in which they were approved by the Cabinet. They were precautionary measures to meet an emergency which the competent authorities thought possible if not probable. But in transmitting them to Sir Arthur Paget, the Commander-in-Chief in Ireland, the Army Council considered it advisable to warn him that these "necessary movements of troops" might cause excitement in Ireland, and to suggest to him that precautionary measures against disorder should be taken not only in Ulster but in South Ireland. Sir Arthur Paget took an even gloomier view of the proposed movements of troops than the Army Council. He thought that they were almost certain to lead to reprisals which would bring the troops into collision with the Ulster volunteers, and he therefore considered it his duty to summon his officers, to give those domiciled in Ulster the opportunity of "disappearing," and to notify to the rest that they would be required to do their duty as defined at the War Office Conference of 16th December, unless they chose to accept dismissal from the army as the preferable alternative.

Accordingly at ten o'clock on the morning of 20th March, the officers were assembled at the Curragh, and Sir Arthur Paget explained the situation in these terms. He did not take the precaution of putting into writing what he intended to say, and there is no undisputed record of the occasion. But the words which he actually used are not very important. The instructions from the War Office, dated 20th March, which he held in his hands ran as follows:

> "The War Office has authorized the following communication to officers:
>
> 1. Officers *whose homes are actually in the province of Ulster* who wish to do so may apply for permission to be absent from duty during the period of operations and will be allowed to "disappear" from Ireland. Such officers will subsequently be re-instated and will suffer no loss in their career.
>
> 2. Any other officer who from conscientious motives is not prepared to carry out his duty as ordered, should say so at once. Such officers will at once be dismissed from the Service."

If this communication was to be made, it is difficult to see what form of words could have avoided the inference which the officers not domiciled in Ulster drew from it that they were put to an immediate choice of either going on and conducting operations against the Ulster volunteers, or of objecting to do so and accepting the penalty of dismissal from the army. This impression was heightened by the fact that the meeting which had begun in the morning was adjourned till two in the afternoon when the officers were requested to bring their answers.

III

The special exception which in the previous December the Army Council had conceded to officers domiciled in Ulster had thus become a test for all officers. Instead of taking for granted that his officers would obey any lawful order issued to them, their Commander-in-Chief acting on War Office instructions had asked them to exercise their judgment on certain hypothetical orders that might be issued to them—which meant in effect on the policy of the Government. This was a high challenge on the spur of the moment, and when the meeting reassembled in the afternoon Brigadier-General Hubert Gough and fifty-seven officers (out of a total of seventy) of the 3rd Cavalry Brigade replied that they preferred to be dismissed.

What followed must be told in Asquith's own words:

"The officers in question, or some of them, were thereupon ordered to report themselves to the Adjutant-General in London. They were told that all that was demanded by the Army Council was that, if and when orders were given, they would be ready to do the duty which lay upon all persons in military service of the Crown; to proceed to any part of Ireland, either for the protection of Government property, or for the assistance of the civil power in the maintenance of order and the preservation of peace.

The officers expressed their willingness to discharge these duties, and, with the approval of Sir A. Paget, they were ordered to rejoin their units in Ireland.

A Memorandum was drawn up and carefully revised by the Cabinet, and when (in substance) published shortly afterwards, as an Army Order, met with general acceptance. It was in the following terms:

'1. No officer or soldier should in future be questioned by his superior officer as to the attitude he will adopt, or as to his action, in the event of his being required to obey orders dependent on future or hypothetical contingencies.

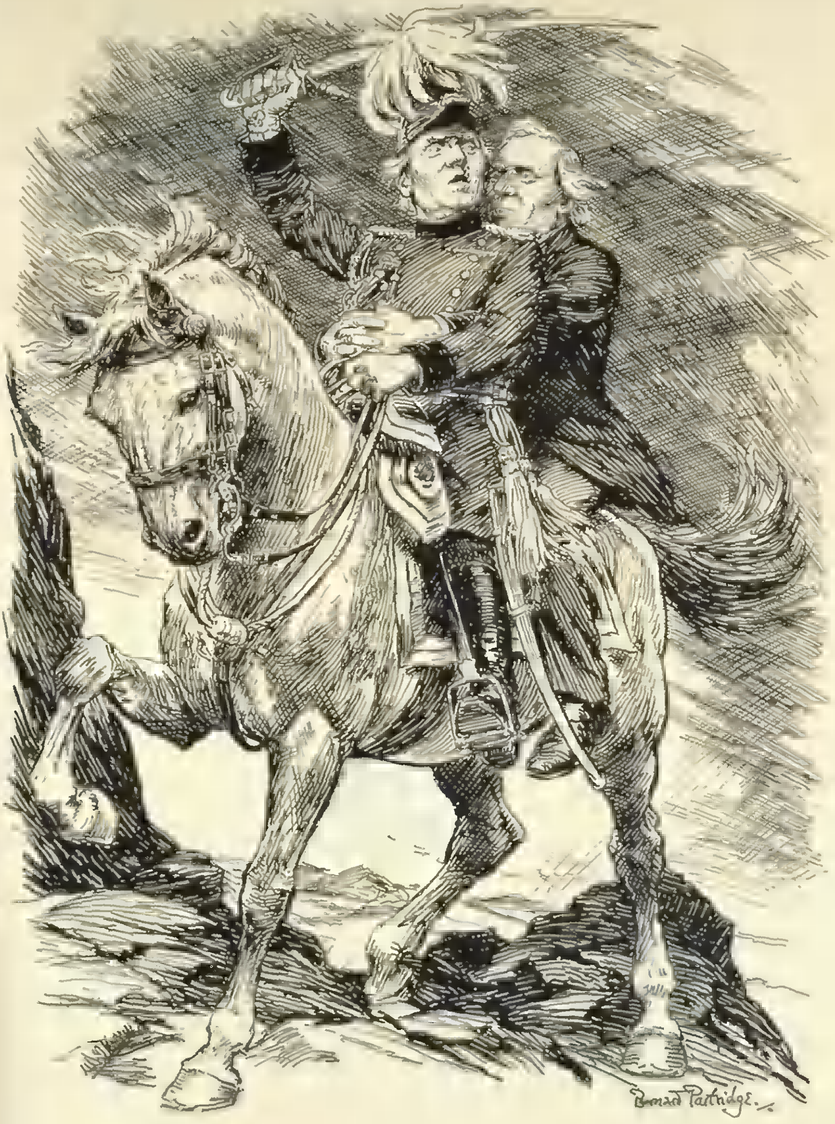
'2. An officer or soldier is forbidden in future to ask for assurances as to orders which he may be required to obey.

'3. In particular, it is the duty of every officer and soldier to obey all lawful commands given to them through the proper channel, either for the safeguarding of public property or the support of the civil power in the ordinary execution of its duty, or for the protection of the lives and property of the inhabitants in the case of disturbance of the peace.'

Unfortunately, through a misunderstanding, for which no one was to blame, in answer to a request from General Gough (of which the Cabinet had no knowledge) that it might be made clear whether, if the Home Rule Bill became law, the officers would be called upon to enforce it under the expression 'maintaining law and order,' the Secretary of State, Colonel Seely, had added, in the copy of the Cabinet Memorandum which he sent to the General, two paragraphs, one of which stated that His Majesty's Government had no intention of taking advantage of the right (to use the forces of the Crown) 'to crush political opposition to the policy or principles of the Home Rule Bill.' Sir John French, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, and Sir Spencer Ewart, the Adjutant-General, initialled the Secretary of State's addition.

When, later in the day, the document so amplified was brought to me, I at once took exception to the added paragraphs. I held, as did my colleagues, that if it was not right to ask an officer what he would do in a hypothetical contingency, still less could it be right for an officer to ask the Government to give him any such assurance. General Gough was accordingly informed that the two added paragraphs were not to be considered as operative.

Colonel Seely, Sir John French, and Sir Spencer Ewart felt it their duty to resign their offices, not from any difference between their view and that of the Government: the two latter because they had initialled the


Bernard Partridge.

cancelled part of the Memorandum; and Colonel Seely, in order (as he stated in the House of Commons) 'that it might not even appear that a Minister of the Crown had made a bargain with servants of the Crown as to the terms of their service.'

It is not necessary to say that Colonel Seely acted throughout with scrupulous regard, not only to the rules of honour, but to the instincts of chivalry.

But a dangerous controversy had been raised, both inside the House of Commons and in the country. There was a serious risk of a struggle, more or less on party lines, upon the issue of 'The Army versus Parliament.'

In the circumstances I felt it right to add to my other burdens the duties of Secretary of State for War. The King handed me the Seals on March 30, and as in my own opinion and that of my legal advisers (though I took no salary) I thereby vacated my seat. I at once appealed to my constituents for re-election.

I was not opposed, and made only a single speech in Fife, at Ladybank on April 4.

I there cited and endorsed the doctrine laid down by the elder Pitt in the House of Commons in 1745:

'The right of inquiring what measures may conduce to the advantage and security of the public belongs not to the Army but to this House. To this House belongs the power of constituting the Army, or of advising His Majesty with regard to its constitution. Our armies have no better right to determine for themselves than any other body of men, nor are we to suffer them to prescribe laws to the Legislature, or to govern those by whose authority they subsist.'

'The Army,' I added, 'will hear nothing of politics from me, and in return I expect to hear nothing of politics from the Army.'

This expectation was fulfilled. The tension which had been created was at once relaxed, and during my short tenure at the War Office my relations with the military authorities, and with those under their control, were throughout of complete cordiality and mutual confidence."[1]

The terse and non-committal terms in which, twelve years after the events, Asquith recites the order of their happening tells little of the excitement which they caused in all parts of the country, or of his own emotions at the time. He was painfully surprised that in issuing instructions to his officers, the Commander-in-Chief should have been authorised to question them as to what they would do or might do in hypothetical circumstances. The question, as he at once perceived, threw upon the officers the onus of deciding questions which were the province of government, and put them in a painful dilemma between their military duties and what might be their political convictions. He had not a little sympathy with General Hubert Gough and his brother-officers, and was strongly of opinion that they did not deserve dismissal for having acted as they did in the circumstances in which they were placed. But he was determined that the situation should be regularised at once, and would not for a moment tolerate the demand for assurances that seemed to be conceded in the paragraph which "through a misunderstanding for which no one was to blame" had been inserted in the War Office Memorandum.

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[1] *Fifty Years of Parliament*, Chap. VII.

What this misunderstanding was needs a little further explanation.

In the passage above-quoted Asquith has cited the Cabinet Memorandum in the form in which it was issued as an Army order. The form in which it was sanctioned by the Cabinet and handed back to Colonel Seely was the following:

> "You are authorised by the Army Council to inform the Officers of the 3rd Cavalry Brigade that the Army Council are satisfied that the incident which has arisen in regard to their resignations has been due to a misunderstanding.
>
> It is the duty of all soldiers to obey lawful commands given to them through the proper channel by the Army Council, either for the protection of public property and the support of the civil power in the event of disturbances, or for the protection of the lives and property of the inhabitants.
>
> This is the only point it was intended to put to the officers in the questions of the General Officer Commanding, and the Army Council have been glad to learn from you that there never has been and never will be any question of disobeying such lawful orders."

The first draft of this was made by the Adjutant-General and then submitted to the Cabinet, which revised it. Colonel Seely had been with the King when the Cabinet was discussing it, and, when he received it back, he was under the impression that he was free to deal with it as circumstances might require. Accordingly in answer to a request for further explanations from General Gough, he added these two paragraphs:

> "His Majesty's Government must retain their right to use all the forces of the Crown in Ireland, or elsewhere, to maintain law and order and to support the civil power in the ordinary execution of its duty.
>
> But they have no intention whatever of taking advantage of the right to crush political opposition to the policy or principles of the Home Rule Bill."

With these additions the document was handed to General Gough, with the signatures of Colonel Seely, Sir John French, and Sir Spencer Ewart. But even this was not quite the end, for General Gough asked whether this document "relieved him from liability to order his Brigade to assist in enforcing submission to a Home Rule Bill," and Sir John French wrote, "I should so read it."

IV

Further details of these transactions have been supplied by Sir Henry Wilson's biographer. It seems that the Director of Military Operations had once more been at work. He had, according to his account committed to his Diary, seen General Gough and consulted with Mr. Bonar Law, whom he kept informed "how the situation was developing," that he had urged the officers to ask for the additional explanations, and undertaken a "mission to the Staff College" to work up support for Sir John French in case he should find it necessary to resign. Again according to his own account, Opposition leaders rang him up at the War Office, and he primed them with material for questions in the House of Commons. Evidently by this time it had become necessary to restore discipline not only at the Curragh but in Whitehall.

All manner of wild rumours had in the meantime gone abroad. Some newspapers asserted that Sir Arthur Paget had spoken of "massacres" and "battles" and the possible disarmament of whole regiments which refused to move. One regiment was said to have mutinied. Unionist politicians started the idea of a "plot"—a swift concentrated attack by army and navy on the Ulster volunteers and the capture of their headquarters by a *coup de main*. Mr. Churchill's slightly flamboyant orders for the movement of battleships which Asquith countermanded as soon as he heard of them, were the chief foundation for that myth, which, as the present narrative will have shown, was totally without foundation. But the Unionist Party in the House of Commons persisted in it, and day after day pelted Asquith with questions about it until finally he refused to answer any more. The King's name had, in the meantime, been brought in, and it was hotly debated whether he had sanctioned the orders given to Sir Arthur Paget. The King, as it happened, had a quite legitimate grievance, for the War Office had omitted to inform him of the events at the Curragh on the day when they happened, and he read of them for the first time in the newspapers. He was naturally greatly distressed, and very properly insisted that he should be carefully informed in the future.

The scene in the House of Commons on 23rd March and 25th March when these events were debated will not easily be forgotten by those who witnessed them. The idea that the Government had bargained with the officers for their return to duty was deeply repugnant not only to Liberals and Radicals, but to a considerable number of others who were good House of Commons men, and nothing could have saved the Government, if Asquith had not been able to make it clear beyond doubt that he and the Cabinet had been prompt to correct the waverings of the military mind on the principles of the British Constitution. He said that the claim or implied claim of the soldiers to receive assurances as a condition of their return to duty " would, if once admitted, put the Government and the House of Commons at the mercy of the Military and the Navy." Labour members were quick to point the moral that, if officers could play this game for a cause in which they were interested, the rank and file would presently play it when called up to deal with civil disorders of a different kind from those contemplated in Ulster. Mr. Ramsay MacDonald said that the syndicalists who had failed to poison the Labour Party with their doctrines had apparently succeeded with the Tories ; and in a resounding speech which was long remembered, Mr. John Ward quoted a syndicalist leaflet which had been issued that morning (22nd March) asking soldiers to remember that officers had exercised an option in obeying orders, and calling upon them to resolve that they would never fire a shot against their own class.

The spread of this mischief was prevented for the time being by Asquith's prompt and decisive action in taking the War Office into his own hands. He took his duties as Secretary for War very seriously and was soon on the best of terms with the Army Council. It contributed not a little to the promptness and efficiency of the steps taken in the critical days before the War that he was at this time his own Minister for War.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE IRISH DEADLOCK

The landing of arms at Larne—Negotiations resumed—An interlude—The search for a boundary—Growth of the National Volunteers—Renewed negotiations—The Buckingham Palace Conference—Its failure—The Government's new proposal—Landing of arms at Howth—The controversy suspended—The fruits of failure.
J. A. S.

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Whatever effect the events recorded in the previous chapter may have had in England, they had apparently none in Ireland where both the parties continued their preparations for armed conflict. On the night and early morning of 24-25th April, a ship, variously named the *Mountjoy* and the *Fanny*, succeeded in landing a cargo of 35,000 rifles and 3,000,000 cartridges at Larne for the use of Ulster volunteers. Twelve thousand men had been engaged in this operation; the naval patrol of the coast had been outwitted; coastguards, police, and customs officers had been powerless spectators. Dublin Castle knew nothing of it till noon the following day.[1] Asquith reported to the King on the 27th that the Cabinet were unanimously of opinion that "this unprecedented attempt to 'hold up' Your Majesty's servants and officers of the customs, coastguards and constabulary, and to obstruct the use of the King's highway to the King's subjects requires instant and effective action." Brave words, but when the Irish law officers got to work it was decided, also unanimously, that their proposals were either "inadequate, excessive, or inexpedient." The Cabinet were back at the old difficulty; proceedings under the ordinary law would certainly fail before a North Ireland jury; any others would precipitate the conflict which they most wished to avoid. The Irish Attorney-General was instructed to prepare informations against the leaders in the High Court, but during the next few days the Unionist leaders made speeches in Parliament which seemed once more to open the door to conciliation, and "in view of the better political atmosphere the Cabinet doubted the wisdom of instituting criminal proceedings."[2]

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[1] Mr. Bonar Law was apparently better informed, for Sir Henry Wilson wrote in his Diary on the 25th: "Bonar Law telephoned wanting to see me, and I went at once. He told me of the mobilisation of the Ulster men last night and of the way they got in 25,000 rifles (the evening papers say 70,000)."

[2] Letter to the King.

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Again and for the last time Asquith took up the business of negotiating. On 5th May, he saw Sir Edward Carson and Mr. Bonar Law together. Both said that temporary exclusion of the Ulster areas with compulsory inclusion at the end of the period (the Government plan) was impossible. Sir Edward insisted that before the Home Rule Bill left the Commons on its third reading it should be announced that the basis of a settlement had been reached and that an amending Bill giving effect to it would follow. Otherwise he feared an outburst in Ulster. Mr. Bonar Law reported that his party was "growingly adverse to any kind of settlement." The Speaker, meanwhile, had offered his services as Chairman of a Conference between party-leaders, but this too came to nothing, since the Unionist leaders refused to go into Conference unless the basis had first been agreed. Asquith, nevertheless, persevered, and in the next few weeks it was provisionally agreed that an option to come in would in the last resort be substituted for automatic or compulsory inclusion at the end of a period.

Whitsuntide brought a little interlude, and Asquith went off for ten days to visit his friends, the Sheffields, at Penrhos, Holyhead. His wife remained in London, but he wrote to her every day, and his letters speak of picnics on the seashore with the Snowden range in full view, of cheerful small talk with friends and fellow-guests, of his daily golf:

> "May 29. I went to the links at Holyhead yesterday which are quite interesting and played one ball, the local professional and Venetia (the Hon. Venetia Stanley) playing the other. I played well, as you may guess, for I beat them nine up and eight to play—winning nine out of the first ten holes. They gave me a half. The professional, as you may imagine, is not a great performer; but I was quite pleased because I both drove and putted well. The links are quite near, and I shall play again if the weather improves."

Play again he did the next day and the day after, until at the end of the week Mr. Lloyd George came upon the scene. Politics now mingle with golf.

> "June 4, 14. Ll. G. arrived here yesterday in time for lunch, and afterwards we went to the links and played a foursome—he and Capt. Ommaney against Francis MacLaren and me. They beat us, but we had quite a good game. Lly. G. drives quite well and is not bad with his iron, but is an execrable putter. He is in very good conversational form, and made himself agreeable to the Sheffields. They did not know him before, and old S. has a considerable aversion for him politically.
>
> He expounded his views on various aspects of the situation to me at great length. For the moment he is a firm believer in an Irish settlement,

but I gather from Montagu, that he had told him almost the exact opposite the day before. He has got back to the land about which he is now much keener than about his budget. He thinks it will 'sweep' the counties." 1914 Age 61

Asquith returned to London on 5th June, greatly refreshed and prepared to face with his usual composure whatever the next turn of the wheel might bring in the inexhaustible Irish question.

II

That question had by this time been fined down to the definition of the part of Ulster to be excluded from the Home Rule Bill. The Unionist leaders now demanded the six counties—the four Protestant ones plus Tyrone and Fermanagh; the Nationalists insisted on Fermanagh and at least the half of Tyrone. This was the position behind the scenes at the beginning of July, but outwardly it looked a good deal harder. The Lords had amended the Amending Bill which embodied the Government plan by substituting the clean cut of the whole Province of Ulster for the county plebiscite proposed by the Government; Unionist leaders, and especially Lord Lansdowne, had spoken as if they still clung to the idea of defeating Home Rule for any part of Ireland. Mr. Bonar Law had evidently not spoken without reason when he told Asquith that he was taking a heavy risk in consenting to negotiate on the basis of the exclusion of the Ulster area. Large numbers of his party either openly avowed or secretly cherished the hope that negotiations would break down on the definition of the boundary, and the Home Rule Bill be wrecked on the failure to agree at the last moment.

The eyes of English party leaders were still on Ulster, but by this time the Ulster example had spread to the South and was rapidly transforming the constitutional and Parliamentary movement into a physical force counterpart of Sir Edward Carson's volunteers. On 9th June, Mr. Redmond issued the following statement:

> "Up to two months ago I felt that the Volunteer movement was somewhat premature, but the effect of Sir Edward Carson's threats on public opinion in England, the House of Commons, and the Government, occurrences at the Curragh Camp, and the successful gun-running in Ulster vitally altered the position, and the Irish Party took steps about six weeks ago to inform their friends and supporters in the country that, in their opinion, it was desirable to support the Volunteer movement, with the result that within the last six weeks the movement has spread like a prairie fire, and all the Nationalists of Ireland will shortly be enrolled."

On 11th June, Mr. Birrell told the House of Commons that

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the figures supplied to him of the National Volunteers showed a force of 80,000 (the Ulster Volunteers were at that moment 84,000), and a few days later (16th June) he added that the force appeared to be increasing at the rate of 15,000 a week. Mr. Birrell added that "the coming into existence of this force and its object" appeared to him to be "sufficiently explained by the existence of the Ulster Volunteer force." The future was being determined in these weeks, and to those who looked below the surface it should have been clear that the settlement of the Irish question on the moderate lines of the Government's Bill was becoming daily more remote.

It was precisely this situation which Asquith had foreseen, and which he had striven his utmost to avert. There had been many moments in these years in which he had been tempted to find relief either in resignation or dissolution from the exhausting and seemingly fruitless efforts to reconcile incompatible temperaments, convictions and fanaticisms, and he might possibly have taken this way of escape if it had not been for the thought of the situation which it would create for the country. Either he would have come back to power to face the same situation with possibly a reduced majority; or the Unionist Party would have been returned to face the Southern Volunteers playing the part hitherto played by the Northern, with the possibility of an even more dangerous question arising about the use of the army.

With these penalties so evidently attaching to failure, he could not believe that the door was closed to an agreed settlement. But May, June, and July were very troubled months behind the scenes. The Amending Bill which was to embody the proposed concessions to Ulster produced fresh complications, and suggested a new and ingenious game of skill to some of the Peers. What if they held it up or so amended it that the Commons were unable to accept it, and in the meantime the Parliament Act period for the unamended Home Rule Bill ran out and it only awaited Royal assent to become law? Would the Government dare to claim that assent for the Bill in its original form—covering all Ulster—when they had admitted that the Amending Bill was necessary to avert Civil War? Would they actually ask the King to endorse a measure which on their own showing would lead to Civil War? It seems not to have occurred to the proposers of this scheme that it might have been as embarrassing to the King as to the Government, and was very unlikely to conciliate a public which was always impatient of tactical manœuvres on serious occasions.

H. H. A. AT MR. FRANK LAWSON'S HOUSE AT EWELME NEAR OXFORD

"Whatever perplexities or difficulties may lie before me and my people, we shall all unite in facing them resolutely, calmly and with public spirit, confident that under divine guidance, the ultimate outcome may be to the common good." In a touching letter to Asquith at the beginning of June the King recalled these words in the letter he addressed to his people on the day of his Coronation, and added that though the perplexities and difficulties had not grown less with time, he knew that he could rely on his Prime Minister's support in the fulfilment of his hopes and prayers of three years ago. In reply Asquith declared his "hearty and continued desire that the hope expressed on Coronation Day may be fully realised." Through it all he remained unruffled, so much so that the Archbishop of Canterbury who visited him one of these days came away, as reported to the King's Secretary, in a state of irritation at his "serene optimism" and "pulseless attitude" in the midst of the tumult. Sir Edward Carson was less composed. He saw no way back and no way forward, and predicted gloomily the spread of Irish and Protestant-Catholic strife in England and Scotland, the Dominions and the United States. To Asquith it seemed incredible that these portentous consequences could follow when it became known to the public that the question had been fined down to the drawing of the appropriate boundary in the County of Tyrone, and the conditions on which the excluded area should vote itself out or vote itself in.

III

When this stumbling-block proved irremovable, he resolved upon the last move which till then had been held in reserve. This was to ask the King to summon party-leaders in his own name to a Conference which, to give it all possible dignity and impressiveness, should be held under the Royal roof. The King was only too willing, and if anything could have melted the hearts of fighting politicians, it was surely the terms in which he addressed those who obeyed his summons to Buckingham Palace on 24th July:

> "GENTLEMEN,
>
> It is with feelings of satisfaction and hopefulness that I receive you here to-day, and I thank you for the manner in which you have responded to my summons. It is also a matter of congratulation that the Speaker has consented to preside over your meetings.
>
> My intervention at this moment may be regarded as a new departure. But the exceptional circumstances under which you are brought together justify my action.
>
> For months we have watched with deep misgivings the course of events

1914 Age 61 in Ireland. The trend has been surely and steadily towards an appeal to force, and to-day the cry of Civil War is on the lips of the most responsible and sober-minded of my people.

We have in the past endeavoured to act as a civilising example to the world, and to me it is unthinkable, as it must be to you, that we should be brought to the brink of fratricidal strife upon issues apparently so capable of adjustment as those you are now asked to consider, if handled in a spirit of generous compromise.

My apprehension in contemplating such a dire calamity is intensified by my feelings of attachment to Ireland and of sympathy with her people, who have always welcomed me with warm-hearted affection.

Gentlemen, you represent in one form or another the vast majority of my subjects at home. You also have a deep interest in my Dominions overseas, who are scarcely less concerned in a prompt and friendly settlement of this question.

I regard you, then, in this matter as trustees for the honour and peace of all.

Your responsibilities are indeed great. The time is short. You will, I know, employ it to the fullest advantage and be patient, earnest, and conciliatory, in view of the magnitude of the interests at stake. I pray that God in His infinite wisdom may guide your deliberations so that they may result in the joy of peace and honourable settlement."

IV

The Conference consisted of the Speaker as Chairman, Asquith and Mr. Lloyd George representing the Government, Lord Lansdowne and Mr. Bonar Law the Opposition, Mr. John Redmond and Mr. Dillon the Irish Nationalists, and Sir Edward Carson and Captain Craig the Ulster Unionists. It sat on consecutive days from 21st July to 24th July, and on the last day Asquith announced to the House of Commons[1] that it had failed. The Speaker briefly reported the result:

> The Conference held four meetings on the 21st, 22nd, 23rd and 24th July respectively.
>
> The possibility of defining an area to be excluded from the operation of the Government of Ireland Bill was considered.
>
> The Conference being unable to agree, either in principle or in detail, upon such an area, brought its meetings to a conclusion.
>
> James W. Lowther.

A few notes in pencil on half-sheets of paper, and sundry maps showing the distribution of Protestant and Catholic are all the records that Asquith preserved of this Conference. "The discussions," he has said in his *Fifty Years of Parliament*,[2] "were carried on in a courteous and friendly spirit and with a real desire to find a way of agreement. They turned entirely on the geographical

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[1] House of Commons, 24th July, 1914.

[2] II, p. 156.

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demarcation of the area to be excluded, temporarily or permanently, from the operation of the Home Rule Bill. There was a debatable territory, particularly in the two counties of Fermanagh and Tyrone, where the racial and religious intermixture presents exceptionally intricate difficulties." It was not quite true, as was commonly said, that the Conference had broken on one half of the county of Tyrone, for the question of the period of exclusion had not been settled, but to this ultimately the great controversy had been narrowed down, and it was upon these two points, boundary and time limit, that British and Irish statesmanship confessed itself helpless.

What the Government now proposed was, as Asquith told the King, to proceed with County option, "but with the omission of automatic inclusion after a term of years and the substitution of fresh power of option as suggested by Sir Edward Carson at the Conference." The Amending Bill as amended by the Lords was down for second reading in the House of Commons on 30th July, and would have been amended again in that sense, if the time-table had been observed. But on the day that the Conference broke up, the Government were informed of the terms of the Austrian ultimatum to Serbia, and when 30th July came, there were other things to think about. By common consent the controversy was suspended at that moment, but how far it was from being disposed of subsequent events were to show.

V

In the last days of July the Nationalist Volunteers endeavoured to match the exploit of the Ulster Volunteers a few weeks earlier by landing a consignment of arms in broad daylight at Howth, near Dublin. Scenes of violence followed, and the soldiers whom the Deputy-Commissioner of Police had called to his assistance were attacked by a jeering mob upon whom they fired, killing three persons and wounding a considerable number. In the midst of other distracting anxieties, the hurried inquest which the Cabinet held upon this matter could scarcely give satisfactory results and whether justice was done became a subject of embittered controversy in later years.

Though the answer must be a pure conjecture, it is almost impossible not to ask the question—what would have happened if the War had not interrupted the course of events. Asquith to the end remained an optimist on that subject. He never could be brought to believe that when it was understood that the Ulster Counties had been offered a free option to come in or stay out there could have

1914 Age 61 been any long lasting strife in Ireland. There was, moreover, another option shortly approaching for the whole British people and Irish. His intention had been to hold a short winter session of Parliament for winding up, and to go to the country as early as possible in the year 1915. Therefore long before the Home Rule Bill had in any serious sense become operative, the Unionist Party would have had their opportunity of returning to power, and, if they did, of amending the Home Rule Act. It seemed to him almost inconceivable that with these abundant and immediate opportunities of effecting their purpose in a peaceful and legal way, if they had a majority behind them, either the Unionist leaders or Sir Edward Carson could permit an appeal to force.

But he was himself so completely a Parliamentarian, and so staunch a believer in the processes of argument, debate, and election, that he perhaps failed to reckon with the passions that had been unloosed both in Ireland and in Conservative circles in England. Seen in retrospect, the Irish controversy of these years looks like the climax of the long struggle between British parties which began with the Liberal victory of 1906, and all but brought Parliament to a deadlock in 1909 and 1911. Pent-up feelings of resentment at the defeat of the House of Lords in 1911 led men of conservative temperament to condone the "direct action" of Ulster as a means of redressing the Constitutional balance which they supposed to have been fatally upset by the Parliament Act, and to do so without much thought of the example they were setting. There were times when Sir Edward Carson seemed much more willing to settle than the Unionist Party were to let him settle, and narrow as the gap was which divided parties at the end of their negotiations, it is possible that no appeal to reason would have prevented serious disorders.

All this is conjectural, but what is certain is that the failure of British parties to agree—which was to be repeated in 1916 and 1917—extinguished all hope of the moderate settlement proposed in Asquith's Bill, and determined the much more drastic settlement which was to come seven years later. It also did the country the considerable disservice of leaving an unsettled controversy to simmer and fester in Ireland during the War, and thus largely to qualify the help so gallantly given by the Irish Parliamentary leaders to the common cause.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE GATHERING STORM

The simultaneous pressure, home and foreign—The Balkan War—The Peace Conference and its breakdown—The Ambassadors' Conference—Tributes to Sir Edward Grey and the Government—The Colonial settlement with Germany—Criticism after the event—The actual problem and its difficulties—Lord Haldane's testimony—The solution adopted—Preparations for war—"Raising an Army"—The test of German policy—Dangers of the naval competition—The German Naval Law of 1912—The Haldane mission—The German proposal—The search for a formula—Its failure—The proposed "Naval Holiday."

J. A. S.

1912–1914 Age 60–61

It would be difficult, if not impossible, to discover any period of six years in English history which presented a Prime Minister and his Government with the same succession of dangerous and anxious questions, home and foreign, as fell to Asquith and his colleagues between 1908 and 1914. The story of each has to be told separately, but it must always be borne in mind that the most difficult and dangerous of the home and foreign crises either ran simultaneously or overlapped one another. At the climax of his struggle with the House of Lords in 1911, the Prime Minister was in doubt from day to day whether the country might not be plunged into a European war; and during the next two years and all through the Irish conflict, there was no certainty from month to month that the quarrels raging in the Balkans might not at any moment, as they eventually did, set the world on fire. In measuring Asquith's achievements or failures the pressure of simultaneous events falling uniquely on the Head of the Government needs constantly to be remembered.

In the end foreign affairs proved to be by far the most important, and their thread must now be taken up from the autumn of 1911 when the Agadir crisis was at length disposed of.

The breathing space that followed lasted for no more than a few weeks. The Turkish Revolution of 1908, so far from strengthening the Ottoman Empire, had revealed its inherent weakness and produced a state of confusion and dissension of which the European enemies of Turkey were quick to take advantage. The example set by Austria-Hungary in the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1908 was followed in 1911 by Italy, which now seized Tripoli, and the next year by the Balkan States which in a short-lived alliance inflicted a series of crushing blows upon the Turks and forced them to an armistice on humiliating terms before the year 1912 was out. The belligerents chose London for the discussion of the Peace Treaty and their delegates assembled in St. James's Palace in December 1912. But by the middle of January 1913 they were at deadlock about Adrianople which Bulgaria claimed and the Turks refused to yield. The Conference broke up; the war was resumed, and Adrianople was taken, but at that point the Allies fell to fighting among themselves, and in a second war in the summer of 1913 Bulgaria was disastrously defeated by Greece and Serbia with the aid of Rumania, and the Turks retook Adrianople. This struggle ended in the Treaty of Bucharest which cut large slices off Bulgaria, shut her out from the Ægean Sea and divided the spoils taken from the Turks between Serbia and Greece.

The British Government had intervened during the Peace negotiations in London to express its disapproval of a scheme to pacify the Turks by restoring to them the islands at the mouth of the Dardanelles, but had otherwise remained a spectator. In April 1913, when there was a possibility that the Bulgarians would enter Constantinople, the Cabinet decided that though it would not "in any way make itself responsible for the expulsion of the Bulgarians" it "could not oppose the action of any power which was directed to that purpose" or sought to "give effect to the views already formulated in concert with the great Powers as to the future of Constantinople and the adjoining territory." That question did not arise, but from the moment the Balkan War broke out, it was clear to Asquith and Grey that other questions almost equally threatening to the peace of the great Powers were not far ahead, and they resolved, if possible, to get in front of them, and to procure their peaceful settlement before the atmosphere became dangerously heated.

True to his general principle that Europe should decide, Sir Edward Grey again proposed a Conference, and this time his proposal found favour. All the Powers were willing and decided to appoint their Ambassadors in London to sit as delegates, with Sir Edward himself presiding. He has told the story of what followed in his own book *Twenty-five Years*,[1] and the details need not be repeated here. The Conference met early in December 1912 and continued its sittings at longer or shorter intervals until the following August, when the Second Balkan War was over, and the immediate danger past. The chief trouble was to provide for Albania, where Turkish rule had been shattered and a dangerous vacuum created. Austria was resolved that Serbia should not have it; Serbia, greatly inflated by her recent victory, put in large claims to the North and North-east of the Province. Montenegro, in the meantime, seized Scutari, and Austria, believing her to be in collusion with Serbia, was determined that she should not keep it. Italy had interests in Southern Albania and in the question of the Islands which also came up. But the main problem was to keep Austria and Russia in line; to prevent the former from refusing reasonable concessions to Serbia and the latter from supporting Serbia in exorbitant claims. It was a long and difficult business requiring great skill and patience, but the Conference served admirably its main purpose of keeping the Powers together until the storm blew over. By a mixture of suasion and compulsion Montenegro was induced to give up Scutari, and Serbian demands were kept within bounds. All over Europe Sir Edward Grey was warmly praised for his patience and fairness, and not least by Germans whose Ambassador Lichnowsky had played a friendly and peaceable part. Nothing was permanently settled, and the German naval competition still clouded the situation, but when the Ambassadors had held their last meeting all Europe heaved a sigh of relief, and the prospect seemed brighter than at any time since the crisis of 1908.

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[1] Vol. I, pp. 264–277.

Asquith told the House of Commons while the Conference was at work that "Great Britain had worked with a single-minded desire with Germany and thereby a mutual confidence had been inspired which he hoped would continue" (10th March, 1913). The hope seemed to be justified during the next few months. Before the winter was over the Foreign Office had reached a settlement of the vexatious and interminable Bagdad Railway question with Germany, and the Colonial Secretary, Mr. Lewis Harcourt,[1] was busily engaged in working out an agreement on the subject of the African colonies of the two countries with Baron Kühlmann, the German Minister in London. This was ready for signature early in 1914, and was only not signed because the Germans objected to Sir Edward Grey's stipulation that the assurance which he had given to Portugal, the ultimate destiny of whose Colonies if she ceased to hold them was part of the agreement, should be published simultaneously with

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[1] The late Viscount Harcourt.

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that document. In the spring of 1914 it seemed as if every question of detail which could have troubled the peace of Germany and Great Britain, if these two Powers stood alone, had been settled or was capable of settlement in a friendly spirit; and for the great antagonisms arising out of the grouping of the Powers and their rivalries, the Concert of Europe had been revived and worked smoothly and unostentatiously to a peaceful conclusion in circumstances which had seemed dangerously threatening to the general peace. In all this the British Government had played a conspicuous and leading part which had earned it the warmest acknowledgments from all its neighbours in Europe.

II

Hopes rose as the diplomatic atmosphere seemed to be clearing, and at the beginning of 1914 the general opinion was that Europe was in a less dangerous condition than for many years past. Unhappily the great antagonisms persisted below the surface, and were even more dangerous when masked by the appearance of friendliness.

The criticism of Asquith's Government in its dealings with foreign affairs during these years has been mainly after the event by critics who have had the advantage of knowing that war was coming on 4th August, 1914, no sooner and no later. With the aid of this knowledge they have presented the case as a simple dilemma. The Government, they say, ought either to have converted the Entente into an Alliance, to have said firmly and clearly that they would fight on the side of France and Russia, and to have occupied the time in raising a conscript army and equipping it with all that is needed by a great army on the Continental scale; *or* they ought to have broken loose from the Franco-Russian entanglement and announced their intention of remaining neutral in any European war. There was no moment in the six years preceding the War in which the situation could have presented itself to Asquith's Government in these simple terms. For the whole period the possibility of war was an increasing anxiety to all members of the Government and especially to Asquith and Grey. First Bosnia-Herzegovina, then Agadir kept them on the rack for months at a stretch; and all the time the Germans were adding to their fleet with intentions that had necessarily to be construed in the light of their challenging diplomacy. In such circumstances it was evidently impossible to return to the "splendid isolation" which Mr. Balfour and Lord Lansdowne thought too dangerous in 1904. No one proposed, no one dreamt of such a thing. In any case such a return would have left unsolved the question of British action in the event of the invasion of Belgium which was very likely to be an incident in any European war.

But the other alternative was equally barred. There was a risk of war, but not a certainty of war, and to treat the risk as a certainty was to make it certain. If the construction of her fleet created a "danger zone" for Germany, there was a corresponding "danger zone" for Great Britain. Great and sensational changes, such as the adoption of compulsory military service, could only have been proposed with any chance of carrying them through if the Government had declared war to be inevitable, and must have placed the country in grave danger of having a war sprung upon it while the Army was in transition. Lord Haldane has left important testimony on this point:

> "In the year 1912 the then Chief of the General Staff told me that he and the General Staff would like to investigate, as a purely military problem, the question whether we could or could not raise a great army. I thought this a reasonable inquiry and sanctioned and found money for it, only stipulating that they should consult the Administrative Staffs when assembling the materials for the investigation. The outcome was embodied in a report made to me by Lord Nicholson, himself a soldier who had a strong desire for compulsory service and a large army. He reported, as a result of a prolonged and careful investigation, that, alike as regarded officers and as regarded buildings and equipment, the conclusion of the General Staff was that it would be in a high degree unwise to try, during a period of unrest on the Continent, to commence a new military system. It could not be built up excepting after much unavoidable delay. We might at once experience a falling off in voluntary recruiting, and so become seriously weaker before we had a chance of becoming stronger. And the temptation to a foreign General Staff to make an early end of what it might insist of interpreting as preparation for aggression on our part would be too strong to be risked. What we should get might prove to be a mob instead of an army. I quite agreed, and not the less because it was highly improbable that country would have looked at anything of the sort."[1]

What, then, remained? Nothing but to make the sea defences of the Empire as far as possible impregnable; to put the Army on a footing on which it could be rapidly mobilised and transported oversea; to provide a well-organised auxiliary force which could be rapidly expanded; to decide the parts to be played by the civil authorities, and the financial and economic measures which might be necessary on the outbreak of war; and in the meantime, to work strenuously for peace, so that, if war came, a united people would recognise it as just and inevitable. This was the policy which Foreign Office, War Office, and Admiralty steadily pursued under Asquith's leadership during the six years before the War, and except on the hypothesis that war was certain and inevitable, there could have been no other.

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[1] *Before the War*, pp. 174–175.

Asquith has himself described in detail the working of the Committee of Imperial Defence and the measures taken at the momentous Imperial Conference of 1909 to bring the Dominions into council with the Imperial Government on the question of Imperial Defence.[1] These measures bore fruit in the quick rally of the Dominions and the avoidance of all panic and confusion when the emergency came. It is of course true that the preparations of this country, as of most others, proved unequal to the enormous demands of the Great War, but it is also true that no British Government ever made so large an addition to naval and military strength in the same space of time or devoted itself so thoroughly and systematically to the organisation of its forces as Asquith's Government between 1908 and 1914. The hypothesis on which that Government acted was that of a partnership in which Great Britain would play the major part at sea, and her partners the major part on land, and no other was possible in the circumstances. The great effort made subsequently need not blind us to the fact that she fulfilled all and more than all that her allies expected of her when the War broke out.

Asquith has left his own comment on this matter in a reply to the observation by Mr. Walter Page that "if the English had raised an army in 1912 and made a lot of big guns, Austria would not have trampled Serbia to the earth" and "there would have been no war":

> "'Raising an Army!' If such language means anything it means that England (to keep the peace of the world), besides preserving at all costs her supremacy over the sea; besides providing garrisons for India and many of her overseas possessions; besides maintaining an expeditionary force for immediate dispatch to any part of the globe; and besides raising, training and equipping a second line army, the Territorials, for home defence, ought to have converted herself into a military power on the Continental model. It is possible, and indeed probable, that her material and personal resources would have been equal to the double strain. But the essential condition of any such change (as was shown to be the case during the War, with the adoption of conscription) would have been that it was supported by the nation with practical unanimity. Was there anything in what had happened up to 1912, or appeared then in the remotest degree likely to happen, which could or ought to have induced the nation to execute a volte-face with a united front? Everybody who lived in those times, and every historian who writes of them with

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[1] *Genesis of the War*, Chapters XIV–XVII.

adequate knowledge, will agree that there is only one answer to the question. Any Government which proposed it would have committed political suicide. It would have split the Cabinet, split the House of Commons, split both political parties, and split the whole nation; if indeed that can be described as a 'split' which would have been regarded as the vagary of a minority insignificant both in authority and in numbers."[1]

The formidable expression of opinion which made the abolition of compulsory service peremptory as soon as the War was over lends additional point to this passage, and raises a strong presumption that objection to this kind of militarism in time of peace is a rooted sentiment in the British people with which all their Governments will have to reckon in the future as heretofore.

III

To Asquith, as he has made clear in *The Genesis of the War*, the main test of German policy during these years was the German fleet. He recognised that Germany's right to build any fleet that she desired was formally and legally beyond challenge, but that it could not be exercised on the scale on which she was now exercising it without endangering our vital defences and therefore requiring counter-measures on our part. He would greatly have preferred that these measures should have been taken without public controversy—that "we should have held our tongues, even if we had to show our teeth," as he once said to the present writer. But the enormous expenditure which they entailed had to be justified to a party which was naturally of a pacific disposition, and looked askance at the exhaustion on armaments of funds that it had ear-marked for social reform. To this party and to the country in general the necessity of each step had to be demonstrated by reference to the activities of the Germans which hypothetically at least had to be presented as hostile. The difficulty throughout, as in the "military conversations," was to draw the line between the hypothetical and the actual. The distinction was never clear to the military or naval mind, and was very easily blurred in the public mind. Germany could not come into the picture year after year as the Power whose naval ambitions required costly counter-efforts on our part without seeming to be "the enemy"; and these counter-efforts and the reasons assigned for them could not become known in Germany without our seeming to be her enemy.

Such, on both sides, was the position in the summer and autumn of 1911, but Ministers had hoped that with the settlement of the Agadir question a new chapter would be opened. It was, therefore, an extremely unpleasant surprise to them to learn before the end of the year that a new German Navy Law was pending. Tirpitz had drawn the characteristic conclusion that the rebuff of Agadir was due to the German weakness at sea, and he now urged that the right reply was to build more ships. This raised a serious question for Asquith and his colleagues who had prepared their naval estimates on the supposition that the German programme would remain unaltered, and now saw themselves under the necessity of adding at least £3,000,000 to the amount which they had intended to ask Parliament to vote. This on the morrow of what they had assured the country was a complete and satisfactory settlement of the controversies of the previous months. "Nothing," says Asquith, "could be more absurd than to proclaim to the world that the two countries had arranged their other differences and were clasping the hands of friendship, while concurrently, they were quickening the pace and enlarging the scope of their naval competition."[1] He was clear that any opportunity which offered the slightest chance of avoiding this absurdity should be seized, and when it was conveyed to him in January 1912 that the German Government was ready for a discussion about its naval plans, he was more than willing.

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[1] *Genesis of the War*, pp. 138–139.

The suggestion came in a roundabout way which, before the affair was over, illustrated most of the disadvantages of unofficial diplomacy. At the end of January 1912, Sir Ernest Cassel visited Berlin armed with a memorandum prepared, according to Lord Haldane,[2] by "some influential members of the Cabinet" and containing suggestions for the improvement of British-German relations. Whether Asquith knew of the memorandum or of Sir Ernest's visit does not appear, but he was generally tolerant of well-meaning private efforts to influence events, if somewhat sceptical of their results. Sir Ernest saw Herr Ballin, and appears through him to have established communications with the Kaiser who seemed to be friendly. The initial steps were hopeful, or looked hopeful from the British side,[3] and Cassel brought back with him a cordial invitation to the Government to send one of their members to confer with German Ministers in Berlin. This, Asquith reported to the King, was issued "with the approval, if not at the instance, of the Kaiser." The Kaiser has printed a fantastic story in his *Memoirs*[4] of what he supposes to have happened next in London. He paints a picture of Sir Edward Grey and Mr. Winston Churchill in envious competition for the honour of being appointed for this mission, and the Cabinet deciding that Mr. Churchill should not have it, and that Sir Edward should be reserved for the "fireworks" at the end, while the preliminary negotiations "as far as the beginning of the fireworks" were undertaken by someone who, like Lord Haldane, was in Grey's and Asquith's pocket.

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[1] *Genesis of the War*, p. 98.

[2] *Before the War*, p. 55 note.

[3] The qualification is necessary, for the Kaiser, according to his own account, suspected a trap from the beginning—*My Memoirs*, English translation, p. 146.

[4] pp. 148–149.

What really happened may be ascertained from Asquith's Cabinet letters to the King. The Cabinet understood from Cassel's communications that what the Emperor desired was that Sir Edward Grey should pay a visit to Berlin—an idea which he had pursued with curious persistency for the past five years.[1] But they were unanimous—and no one was clearer on the point than Sir Edward himself—that since nothing had been said so far about policy, it would be premature for the Foreign Secretary to go. There never was any question of Mr. Churchill's going,[2] and the proposal that Lord Haldane should go came from Sir Edward Grey. Up to this point Ministers were extremely reluctant to commit themselves officially to what might be interpreted as a *démarche* against the German Navy Bill. But, as Asquith explained to the King, Haldane "had occasion to go to Germany in his character of Chairman of the London University Commission to obtain first-hand knowledge of the German methods of clinical teaching," and it was proposed that he should "at the same time be commissioned to see the Emperor and the Chancellor, and on the basis of the communications to feel the way in the direction of a more definite understanding." Haldane liked both the mission and the method, and it was decided that he should start on 6th February. By this time the disguise had worn rather thin, for the British Ambassador in Berlin had come to London to make the arrangements for his visit and returned to Berlin to complete them before Haldane's arrival.

IV

The Emperor appears to have expressed some surprise at the curious British method of entrusting naval negotiations to the Secretary for War, or, for that matter, either naval or military affairs to a lawyer. But he liked Haldane and had been his guest at a famous luncheon party in London in the previous year, and nothing could have exceeded the courtesy with which he now received him in Berlin, albeit that (according to his own account),[1] he was keenly on guard to prevent the affair developing into "a foreign assault upon our right of self-determination"—the plea on which Germany had hitherto resisted all efforts to abate the naval competition. Lord Haldane has given his own account of what followed,[2] and it is corroborated on all material points by Herr von Bethmann Hollweg in his *Reflections*, and in the Life of Ballin. Briefly it amounted to this, that the Germans offered only a retardation of their programme, in return for a political agreement which would have detached us from the Entente and compelled us to observe a "benevolent neutrality" in the event of a war between Germany and France, or a war between the Triple and the Dual Alliances.

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[1] I myself had an interview with the Kaiser at Potsdam in June 1907, and he was even then strong on the point that Sir Edward Grey should visit Berlin. He is supposed afterwards to have complained that his invitations had met with no response, but no invitation was ever delivered except in these purely informal and unofficial ways. J. A. S.

[2] Mr. Churchill had himself declined the suggestion at an early stage. See his letter to Sir E. Cassel, 7th January, British Documents, Vol. VI, p. 666.

Haldane returned to London on the 11th, bringing back with him both the draft of the new Naval Law (about which he had prudently refrained from expressing any opinion) and the text of the proposed political agreement together with the revisions which he had suggested to the German Chancellor. Mr. Churchill sat up all night with his experts at the Admiralty examining the draft law, and on the 14th, reported to the Cabinet that it was much worse than they had been led to expect. Its most serious feature was, as Asquith reported to the King, not so much the addition of three new battleships, nor even the creation of a third battle squadron, but the increase of personnel (under the heads of third squadron, torpedo destroyers and submarines) amounting by the year 1920 to 15,000 fresh naval recruits. Mr. Churchill was next asked to ascertain what would be the cost of the necessary additions to the British Navy, if the German programme were carried out, and a week later he produced a statement showing that the aggregate additional expenditure in the next five years would be £14,245,000, and nearly £12,000,000 on the favourable assumption that the retardation suggested as possible by Admiral Tirpitz were carried out. On this Asquith commented in his report to the King:

> "These are very serious figures, and it was felt by the Cabinet that to follow an exchange of pacific and friendly formulæ by the introduction in both countries of estimates showing a large and progressive increase in naval expenditure would justly be regarded as an absurdity, if not a mockery. It would certainly give a great shock to public opinion in both Germany and Great Britain and would undo the good effects which the recent Entente has produced."

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[1] *My Memoirs*, p. 148.

[2] *Before the War*, pp. 57–67.

It was agreed by the Cabinet that Sir Edward Grey should see Count Metternich "more or less informally, and in the company of Haldane, and point out to him the difficulty which these naval proposals put in the way of the rapprochement we so sincerely desire, and the importance with a view to the attainment of our common object that they should be reshaped in a form which will not call for a riposte from this country."

The naval part of the affair was thus handed back to Germany, and for a month no more was heard of it. Then (14th March, 1912) Lord Haldane had what he termed a "remarkable interview" with Count Metternich, who left on him the impression that the German Chancellor had for the moment got the better of Admiral von Tirpitz, and that "the German Government were prepared, if we could offer them an acceptable formula, not to press the provocative parts of the new Navy law." Again Asquith was more than willing, and the Cabinet set to work on the search for the acceptable formula. The original and unacceptable formula which Herr von Bethmann Hollweg had proposed to Haldane has already been published,[1] but it must be repeated here:

> "1. The High Contracting Powers assure each other mutually of their desire for peace and friendship.
>
> 2. They will not, either of them, make any combination or join any combination, which is directed against the other. They expressly declare that they are not bound by any such combination.
>
> 3. If either of the High Contracting Parties become entangled in a war with one or more other Powers, the other of the High Contracting Parties will at least observe toward the Power so entangled a benevolent neutrality, and use its utmost endeavour for the localization of the conflict.
>
> 4. The duty of neutrality which arises from the preceding article has no application in so far as it may not be reconcilable with existing agreements which the High Contracting Parties have already made. The making of new agreements which make it impossible for either of the Contracting Parties to observe neutrality toward the other beyond what is provided by the preceding limitaions is excluded in conformity with the provisions contained in Article 2."

The Cabinet now proposed to substitute the following:

> "The High Contracting Parties assure each other mutually of their desire for peace and friendship. England will neither make nor join in any unprovoked attack on Germany and pursue no aggressive policy towards her. Aggression on Germany is not the subject and forms no part of any treaty, understanding or combination to which England is now a party, nor will she become a party to anything that has such an object."

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[1] Haldane, *Before the War*, pp. 64–65.

1912–1914
Age 60–61

The Germans replied by proposing to add, "England will therefore observe at least a benevolent neutrality should war be forced upon Germany," or, "England will therefore as a matter of course remain neutral if war is forced upon Germany." The acceptance of this would of course have been fatal to the Entente, which is no doubt what the Germans intended, but Asquith remarks that "if there had been no Entente at all Great Britain would have been bound, even in her own interests alone, to refuse it."[1] It would, for instance, "have precluded us from coming to the help of France should Germany on any pretext attack her and aim at getting possession of the Channel ports." Neither then nor later was it possible to attach serious importance to a belligerent's definition of a war as having been "forced upon her." Germany had never admitted that any war was other than "forced upon her."

A last effort was made to induce the German Government to say unequivocally what it meant and wanted, but this too was without result, and at the end of the month of March the Naval Bill was introduced, as it stood, in the Reichstag. By this time the atmosphere had again become heated, and a phrase used by Mr. Churchill in a speech at Glasgow (9th February) while Lord Haldane was in Germany had been caught up by the German press and stigmatised by the Emperor as a piece of arrogance demanding an apology. Mr. Churchill had said that "while the British navy is to us a necessity, the German navy is to them more in the nature of a luxury. Our naval power involves British existence. It is existence to us, it is expansion to them." Why these words should have given such violent offence is not even now clear, for they seem to express what is a mere platitude to the British reader. It has been suggested that the word *luxus* has an implication which the English word "luxury" has not; in any case it played into the hands of Tirpitz and the Emperor, who by this time had persuaded himself that the Haldane mission was "a manœuvre conceived on a large scale for the sole purpose of hampering the development of the German fleet." Asquith did not join the hue and cry against Mr. Churchill, whom he considered to have made "a plain statement of an obvious truth," even though the word "luxury" might not have been happily chosen. But it was brought home to him and the Cabinet that for the time being there was no advance along the road of mutual reduction, and that the best intended efforts on their part were liable to be misrepresented in Berlin as an arrogant invasion of German rights.

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[1] Cabinet letter to the King.

A year later (26th March, 1913) Mr. Churchill made an appeal for a "naval holiday," i.e. a cessation of new construction for twelve months, but this too evoked no response, and from that time onwards nothing remained but to frame British Naval Estimates in accordance with German construction, which brought them up in the last year before the War to £51,000,000, an increase of more than £18,000,000 since Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman's Government succeeded to office in 1905.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE GATHERING STORM—(*Continued*)

The Naval situation in 1912—The new dispositions—Withdrawal from the Mediterranean and its consequences—A decisive fact—The Naval conversations and their limits—The Grey-Cambon letters—Legal and moral objections—Asquith's view of British freedom—The price of neutrality—Naval Estimates in the Cabinet—Another sharp contention—Asquith's handling of his colleagues.

J. A. S.

1912–1914
Age 60–61

THOUGH the French Government was fully informed and professed to be benevolent, it had watched with some anxiety the negotiations following the Haldane Mission, and as soon as these were over, Asquith reported to the Cabinet (17th May, 1912) that their naval attaché was pressing for an answer to his inquiry about possible naval co-operation in the event of war. It had become apparent, he told the King, " that the whole Mediterranean situation must be re-surveyed from the point of view both of policy and strategy." The situation which presented itself in the spring of 1912, and the measures taken to meet it have been described by Mr. Churchill in a passage which may be reproduced here:

> " The growth of the German Navy produced its inevitable consequences. The British Fleet for safety's sake had to be concentrated in Home Waters. The first concentration had been made by Lord Fisher in 1904. This had effected the reduction of very large numbers of small old vessels which were scattered about the world ' showing the flag ' and the formation in their place of stronger, better, more homogeneous squadrons at home. This measure was also a great and wise economy of money. A few months later the British battleships were recalled from China. The more distant oceans had thus been abandoned. But now a further measure of concentration was required. We saw ourselves compelled to withdraw the battleships from the Mediterranean. Only by this measure could the trained men be obtained to form the Third Battle Squadron in full commission in Home Waters. It was decided by the Cabinet that we must still maintain a powerful force in the Mediterranean, and ultimately, four battle cruisers and an armoured cruiser squadron were accordingly based on Malta. It was further decided that a Dreadnought battle squadron should also be developed in the Mediterranean by the year 1916 equal in strength to that of the growing Austrian battle fleet. These decisions were taken with the deliberate object of regaining our complete independence. But the withdrawal—even if only for a few years—of

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> the battleships from the Mediterranean was a noteworthy event. It made us appear to be dependent upon the French fleet in those waters. The French also at the same time redisposed their forces. Under the growing pressure of German armaments Britain transferred her whole Battle Fleet to the North Sea, and France moved all her heavy ships into the Mediterranean. And the sense of mutual reliance grew swiftly between both navies."[1]

These dispositions were the inevitable result of the German challenge, and it is strange, as Mr. Churchill remarks, that Admiral Tirpitz should have congratulated himself on having "ended the English control" in the Mediterranean while failing to perceive that his policy was having the effect which he most feared of driving French and British closer together. For the British Cabinet there was in the circumstances no choice, but the result was undoubtedly, as Asquith himself has said, to make France feel that "she could calculate upon our vetoing any attack by sea upon her northern and western coasts, which were practically denuded of naval protection by her concentration in the Mediterranean."[2] The Germans also realised this, as they proved by their offer in July 1914 to forgo attacks on the northern coasts of France, if Britain would remain neutral. Undoubtedly the making of these dispositions was of the highest importance, and if the final link in the chain of circumstance, policy and strategy which gradually bound Britain and France together is to be looked for at any particular point, it will be found here. But in Asquith's view the defence of the northern coasts of France and the Channel ports against a German attack was a British interest which could in no case have been shirked, and though he was strong on the point that we should retain our freedom and exercise it in our own way, he accepted the implications of the new dispositions as a necessary part of the British policy which would have been imposed upon us whether we were under formal obligations to France or not.

On all these points Asquith had a complete understanding with Sir Edward Grey and he had been over the ground so often and so thoroughly in the Committee of Imperial Defence that his judgment was quick and decisive at the critical moments. But the course of events was exceedingly disturbing to those members of the Cabinet and especially Lord Loreburn and Lord Morley, who were constitutionally averse from all measures that looked like a preparation for war, and heard with uneasiness that naval were now being added to military conversations. Both Asquith and Grey assured them that nothing had been arranged between the soldiers and sailors which constituted a binding compact on Parliament or Government, but a natural desire was expressed that this should be put definitely on record. To this Asquith at once consented and Lord Grey has described the scene in the Cabinet of 21st November, 1912, when the letter to M. Cambon defining the position was drafted :

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[1] *World Crisis*, 1911–1914, p. 111.

[2] *Genesis of the War*, p. 82.

> "There was a demand that the fact of the military conversations being non-committal should be put into writing. I had the impression that some Ministers, who had not been members of the Committee of Defence, expected some demur to this, and were suspiciously surprised at the immediate assent to the proposal given by myself and Asquith. I had made it so plain to Cambon that the Government, must remain absolutely free and uncommitted, that I anticipated no difficulty whatever in getting a satisfactory exchange of notes with him on behalf of ourselves and the French Government. I knew he understood and accepted the position, and would make no difficulty ; and, if there had been any doubt raised, I was prepared to contend that the military conversations must stop and not be resumed till the condition of them was made clear. I therefore agreed, readily and at once, to the proposal that this condition should be put in writing.
>
> We proceeded to draft the letter in the Cabinet, and again I thought I was conscious of a little surprise that words unqualified and explicit were agreed to. The letter, as approved by the Cabinet, was signed and given by me to Cambon, and I received one in similar terms from him in exchange."[1]

The letter itself and M. Cambon's answer became familiar to the public in 1914, when they were included in the published British documents, but for convenience they may be printed here :

FOREIGN OFFICE,
November 22nd, 1912.

MY DEAR AMBASSADOR,

From time to time in recent years the French and British naval and military experts have consulted together. It has always been understood that such consultation does not restrict the freedom of either Government to decide at any future time whether or not to assist the other by armed force. We have agreed that consultation between experts is not, and ought not to be, regarded as an engagement that commits either Government to action in a contingency that has not arisen and may never arise. The disposition, for instance, of the French and British fleets respectively at the present moment is not based upon an engagement to co-operate in war.

You have, however, pointed out that if either Government had grave reason to expect an unprovoked attack by a third Power it might become essential to know whether it could, in that event, depend upon the armed assistance of the other.

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[1] *Twenty-five Years*, I, pp. 96–98.

I agree that, if either Government had grave reason to expect an unprovoked attack by a third Power, or something that threatened the general peace, it should immediately discuss with the other whether both Governments should act together to prevent aggression and to preserve peace, and, if so, what measures they would be prepared to take in common. If these measures involved action, the plans of the General Staffs would at once be taken into consideration, and the Governments would then decide what effect should be given to them.

Yours, etc.,
E. Grey.

French Embassy,
London,
November 23rd, 1912.

Dear Sir Edward,

You reminded me in your letter of yesterday, November 22, that during the last few years the military and naval authorities of France and Great Britain had consulted with each other from time to time; that it had always been understood that these consultations should not restrict the liberty of either Government to decide in the future whether they should lend each other the support of their armed forces; that, on either side, these consultations between experts were not, and should not be, considered as engagements binding our Government to take action in certain eventualities; that, however, I had remarked to you that, if one or other of the two Governments had grave reason to fear an unprovoked attack on the part of a third Power, it would become essential to know whether it could count on the armed support of the other.

Your letter answers that point, and I am authorised to state that, in the event of one of our two Governments having grave reasons to fear either an act of aggression from a third Power, or some event threatening the general peace, that Government would immediately examine with the other the question whether both Governments should act together in order to prevent the act of aggression and preserve peace. If so, the two Governments would deliberate as to the measure which they would be prepared to take in common; if those measures involved action, the two Governments would take into immediate consideration the plans of their General Staffs, and would then decide as to the effect to be given to those plans.

Yours, etc.,
Paul Cambon.

The circumstances in which these letters were exchanged dispose of the idea, which obtained currency in later years, that they and the naval dispositions which preceded them became known to the Cabinet as a whole for the first time in the crisis of July 1914. They were not only known to the Cabinet, but actually instigated by it. It may be added, however, that these letters had in one respect exactly the opposite effect to that designed for them, for when the news of them reached Germany, the inference was drawn that the Anglo-French Entente had been strengthened and prolonged.[1]

II

It has been said in after years that the disclaimer of legal obligation contained in the Grey-Cambon correspondence was a pure formality which could have no weight against the binding nature of the facts. In a sense that is true, and, as has been shown above, Asquith was thoroughly alive to the responsibilities which his Government had incurred. Nevertheless he held the retention of freedom for the British Government and Parliament to be of real and vital importance. It was, as he saw it, a guarantee (1) that France and Russia would not embark on any policy to which the adhesion of the British people was doubtful, as conceivably they might have done if British support was assured in advance, and (2) even more important, that, if the British people were called upon to enter a war, they would do so on the decision of their own Parliament and Government, and not at the call of foreign Governments proclaiming a *casus fœderis*. To a real believer in democratic and Parliamentary institutions like Asquith the distinction was vital, and if unity was obtained in the end, it was largely, in his opinion, because the call to arms came from Parliament on the deliberate decision of the Cabinet that British interests and an acknowledged British Treaty obligation required it.

It is nevertheless beyond question that the events of these months were of vital importance in deciding what was to come. The failure of the Haldane Mission and the refusal of the formula of neutrality, which the Germans demanded, shut the door on any return to the policy of isolation. It is highly probable that the Germans would have been willing to pay a higher price than any they had yet offered, if by doing so they could have secured the neutrality of Great Britain in a war between Germany and France, or between the Triple and Dual Alliances. The German documents show that even Tirpitz was willing to strike a bargain on these terms. But in Asquith's opinion, which was shared by all his colleagues in 1912, their acceptance by a British Government must have meant the establishment either by war or by diplomacy of a German hegemony in Europe with Britain marked down for future settlement, and left, meanwhile, without a friend in the world. A vivid memory of the horrors of the Great War has led some critics of pre-war diplomacy to suggest that even this and any submission that it might have involved would have been preferable to what followed, but this was not and could not have been the view of any British Government in the year 1912.

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[1] See *Brandenburg, Von Bismarck Zum Weltkriege,* pp. 376–377. Herr Brandenburg suggests that M. Poincaré procured this exchange of letters to allay his anxiety about a possible British-German *rapprochement ;* and he describes the letters as "a new moral tie" between France and Great Britain, which was in doubtful accord with the negotiations then going on for a Colonial agreement between Great Britain and Germany. Prof. Pribram adopts the same explanation in his *Ford Lectures,* p. 140.

III

In view of what has been related it is scarcely surprising that at the end of the year 1913 and the beginning of the year 1914, Naval Estimates should once more have become a subject of anxious debate in the Cabinet. This time the parts were largely reversed, and Mr. Churchill who was one of the two leading economists in 1909 was now, as First Lord of the Admiralty, passionately demanding a large increase over the estimates of the previous year. He has himself given the details of what followed in his *World Crisis*[1] and they need not be repeated here. The battle raged over oil fuel, gun calibre, increased speeds, and above all the four new battleships of the 1914-15 programme, the acceleration of which was said to be demanded both by German and Austrian activities and by the action of the Canadian Senate which had held up the promised Canadian contribution of three battleships. Once more Asquith saw himself faced with the familiar alternatives ; the First Lord resigning with a procession of Sea-Lords following him, stalwart Radicals leaving the Government in protest against bloated armaments, the House of Commons in revolt, etc.

The Admiralty set forth its case in a volume of eighty pages in which, says Mr. Churchill, " we analysed minutely each vote and marshalled our reasons." That exposed a wide flank to criticism and since among the critics was an ex-First Lord who was " versed in every detail of the problem and entitled to be exactly informed on every point," the controversy was greatly prolonged and immensely technical. Among its by-products was the " economy " which substituted a " trial mobilisation " for the usual naval manœuvres, with the happy and Providential result that the fleet, instead of being scattered on manœuvres, was at its stations and instantly ready in the crisis of the following July.

Asquith was early convinced that the chief part of the First Lord's demands would prove irresistible, when measured either by the standard which the Cabinet had accepted for the fleet or by the activities of other Powers, and he devoted himself to securing peace on that basis. There was ample time before the naval estimates had to be presented to Parliament, and he achieved his object mainly by skilful adjournments when a crisis seemed to be imminent. At the beginning the gulf between Mr. Lloyd George and Mr. Churchill had seemed beyond bridging by any diplomacy, but it turned out that Mr. Churchill had something in hand which he was prepared to give away, and that Mr. Lloyd George was open to persuasion. Nevertheless, there were moments when Asquith had quite seriously to face the possibility of a break-up and to consider what his own course should be in that event. His daily letters to his wife, who was spending some part of the winter under doctor's orders in the South of France, contain lively comments on various phases of this affair :

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[1] *World Crisis*, 1911–1914, Chap. VIII, pp. 171–178.

Asquith to his Wife.

Jan. 6. Illingworth, Grey, Samuel, Seely, etc., full of maledictions of Ll. G. and his heedless interview[1] which had set all Europe by the ears, not to mention the party here. Winston is still in Paris and maintains a dignified and moody silence.

Jan. 20. I find political affairs very much embrangled, as Ll. G. and Winston are still poles apart over the Navy, and it looks as if it might eventually come to breaking-point. If this were plainly inevitable sooner than have a smash-up and resignation, I should probably dissolve Parliament and run the risk of the election. I had a long talk with Grey this morning (the only colleague I have yet seen) and he inclines to that view. But it is too soon to come to decisions, and as the expected rarely happens, the clouds may blow over.

Jan. 21. Our Navy situation has been developing to-day, and not in a pacific fashion. I had a long talk with Crewe who stayed to lunch and was as usual, wise and far-seeing. This afternoon I have been at a conclave of the malcontents, Ll. G. was there, but Simon, Samuel, and of all people Beauchamp are far the most aggressive and most anti-Winston. I doubt increasingly whether the thing can be patched up ; it is curious what personal hostility Winston excites even in the most unexpected quarters.

Jan. 23. I think we shall get through our little troubles over the Navy without much more ado—Ll. G. squeezing in one direction, and Winston in the other. Neither of them wants to go and in an odd sort of way they are really fond of one another. Even small crises reveal people's qualities. One of the men I think less of after this is X.

Sunday, Jan. 25. Our little crisis seems to be melting away, for the moment at any rate, and the alternative of an election is not likely to present itself, if at all, just now. One cannot say for certain till after the Cabinet on Tuesday, but both Ll. G. and Winston are anxious for an accommodation. I had lunch on Friday at the F.O. with E. Grey, who had managed to sprain his ankle the night before. It was to meet the Greek P.M. Venizelos who is really a remarkable man. Winston, Ll. G., J. Morley, etc. were there.

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[1] In an interview with the *Daily Chronicle* on 3rd January, Mr. Lloyd George had deplored the folly of expenditure on armaments, had pointedly referred to the resignation of Lord Randolph Churchill on the subject of economy, and expressed the opinion that the prospects of the world were never more peaceful.

Jan. 27. I got back here yesterday afternoon, and have been immersed in business since. Haldane, Ll. George, Winston and other visitors; and all this afternoon the Cabinet where we had a long discussion on Navy without coming to any definite conclusion. We go on again to-morrow morning when we ought to decide something one way or another. There was abundance of good temper, but also much plain speaking (or barking) on the part especially of three I call the beagles. In fact the divisions of thought and speech are rather curious. So far I hold my tongue and listen, but I expect I shall have to take a fairly strong line in the end.

Jan. 29. We have had another Cabinet to-day about the Navy. The leaders of the malcontents (Simon and Beauchamp) came to see me beforehand, to assure me of their loyalty, etc.—I having made a strong appeal yesterday to the whole pack not to split at such a time on such a point. There is no doubt that Winston tries them rather high; to use his own phrase to-day he "gyrates around the facts"; and in the House we shall have a devil of a time with our own people.

In the end peace was restored, and having made sundry concessions Mr. Churchill got all that was material in his programme "thanks," as he says, "to the unwearying patience of the Prime Minister, and to his solid, silent support."[1] The House of Commons accepted the result with comparative composure.

[1] *World Crisis,* I, 178.

CHAPTER XXXV

ON THE VERGE OF WAR

The murder of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand—The records of the Cabinets, July 25th–August 4th. J. A. S.

1914
Age 61

ASQUITH and his colleagues were often reproached in after days for not having foreseen the coming of war, and if it is meant that they did not expect war in August 1914, the charge may be admitted. They had at least three times in the previous eight years come up to the edge of the precipice; they had lived from year to year in an atmosphere of danger, and a large part of Asquith's own time and thought had been given to the working out in the Committee of Imperial Defence of the measures which would need to be taken, if war came. But in the first months of 1914, the European situation seemed to be less dangerous, and British and German relations easier than at almost any period in the previous six years. The naval question was dormant; the Balkan quarrel had been settled for the time being by the Ambassadors' Conference in 1913; the Morocco question had ceased to trouble; a comprehensive settlement between Britain and Germany of outstanding Colonial and Asiatic questions, including the Bagdad railway, only awaited German signature. It is true that exaggerated reports of "Naval Conversations" with Russia had caused more mischief than was realised at the time, but the King's visit to Paris in April had seemed to pass off without ruffling German susceptibilities and the friendly Lichnowsky who was now German Ambassador in London was on the best of terms with London Society and all parties in the State.

The murder of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife at Serajevo on 28th June, caused the same emotions in this country as elsewhere—horror, indignation, sympathy with the Austrian people and their aged Emperor. British Governments had not in the past been tender to Serbian regicides, and no one in this country dreamt of any interference with the course of justice. The furious campaign against Serbia which was started in the Austro-Hungarian press at the end of June caused some anxiety, but it seemed not unnatural in the circumstances; and since the Serbian Government joined in the condemnation of the outrage and declared its willingness to submit to trial any of its subjects who might be implicated, it was hoped that the issue would be the simple one of crime and punishment. The British Government, like the French and Russian, was unaware of the heated incitements to go all lengths against Serbia—since revealed in the Kautsky documents—which were passing from the Emperor William to the Austro-Hungarian Government, and Sir Edward Grey was willing, if the need arose, to play again the part which he had played in the previous year, of persuading Russia to consent to any reasonable satisfaction which Austria might demand from Serbia.

II

Whole volumes have been written on the history of the last days before the War, and Asquith has made his own contributions in his *Memories and Reflections* and his *Genesis of the War*. It remains in this book to elucidate the action of the Cabinet over which he presided as Prime Minister during the critical days.

Late in the afternoon of 23rd July, the Austrian ultimatum to Serbia was presented at Belgrade, and on the following morning was communicated to Sir Edward Grey, who, like the rest of the world, judged it to be "unexpectedly severe, harsher in tone and more humiliating in its terms than any communication of which we had recollection addressed by one independent Government to another."[1] On the same day the Buckingham Palace Conference on the Irish question held its last meeting, and the Government found itself faced with the imminent possibility of serious disturbances, if not civil war in Ireland, in consequence of its failure. The Cabinet met the following morning (25th July) and later in the day Asquith reported to the King:

Asquith to the King.

10 Downing Street,
Whitehall, S.W.
July 25th, 1914.

Mr. Asquith with his humble duty to Your Majesty has the honour to report that the Cabinet met yesterday afternoon.

The situation created by the failure of the Irish Conference was carefully surveyed, and it was resolved to proceed with the Amending Bill early next week, Tuesday being the day alternatively fixed. The Government

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[1] *Twenty-five Years*, I, p. 310.

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will propose the restoration of county options, but with the omission of automatic inclusion after a term of years, and the substitution of a fresh power of option, as suggested by Sir E. Grey at the Conference.

Sir E. Grey reported the terms and general effect of the ultimatum delivered by Austria to Servia—the gravest event for many years past in European politics; as it may be the prelude to a war in which at least four of the great Powers might be involved. Sir E. Grey was to suggest to Prince Lichnowsky yesterday evening the possibility of a mediating group—consisting of England, Germany, France and Italy—offering its offices in the interests of peace.

By the evening of the 24th, Sir Edward Grey had proposed mediation by the four disinterested Powers—Germany, France, Italy and Great Britain—and urged Serbia to be as conciliatory as possible, in the meantime, in spite of the harsh terms of the ultimatum.

Sir Edward Grey has explained that having launched this proposal on the 24th, he held his hand on the 25th, in the belief that it would be more likely to succeed, if this time some other Power took the initiative. But the Austrian ultimatum was running out, and since no other Power had moved, he made the definite proposal of a Conference of the disinterested Powers on behalf of the British Government on the following day, Sunday, 26th July. On the same day Austria mobilised against Serbia, having rejected the all but complete submission of the Serbian reply, and Mr. Churchill gave orders that the British fleet which was concentrated at Portland should not disperse.[1] The Cabinet met the next afternoon but the Irish strain is still mingled with the European in the record:

Asquith to the King.

10 Downing Street,
Whitehall, S.W.
July 28th, 1914.

Mr. Asquith, with his humble duty, has the honour to report to Your Majesty that the Cabinet held a short meeting yesterday afternoon.

The first topic for discussion was the lamentable incident which occurred in Dublin on Sunday. The whole of the facts, so far as known, was carefully reviewed, with the result that the Cabinet approved of the suspension of Mr. Harrel, and of a full inquiry in the whole matter, which was debated with some acrimony later in the evening in the House.

The main subject of consideration was the situation in the Near East. Sir E. Grey reported conversations with Count Mensdorff, who stated that Austria regarded the Servian reply as in effect a non-acceptance of her conditions; and with Prince Lichnowsky, whom he urged to press upon the German Government the importance of persuading Austria to take a more favourable view of the Servian note. 1914 Age 61

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[1] For this year a "trial mobilisation" had been substituted (for reasons of economy) for the usual Naval manœuvres, and it had the fortunate though undesigned effect of bringing the fleet together at this critical moment.

Austria has given assurances that she will not in any event annex Servian territory, but this will not satisfy Russia.

Sir E. Grey further explained his proposal for a Conference *à quatre* of the less interested Powers in London. France would agree, and possibly Italy, but Germany's adhesion is more than doubtful.

So far as the country is concerned, the position may be thus described. Germany says to us, "If you will say at St. Petersburg that in no conditions will you come in and help, Russia will draw back and there will be no war." On the other hand, Russia says to us, "If you won't say you are ready to side with us now, your friendship is valueless, and we shall act on that assumption in the future."

It was agreed to consider at the next Cabinet our precise obligations in regard to the neutrality of Belgium.

The action of the First Lord in postponing the dispersal of the First and Second Fleets was approved.

From this time onwards there were Cabinets daily and often twice a day, but Asquith was now in constant oral communication with the King, and there are only four written records:

Asquith to the King.

10 Downing Street,
Whitehall, S.W.
July 30th, 1914.

Mr. Asquith, with his humble duty to Your Majesty, has the honour to report that the meeting of the Cabinet yesterday was mainly occupied with the diplomatic situation.

At the moment the best hope of peace appeared to lie in the communications which the German Chancellor was making at Vienna.

The Cabinet carefully reviewed the obligations of this country in regard to the neutrality, arising out of the two Treaties of April 1839, and action which was taken by Mr. Gladstone's Government in August 1870.

It is a doubtful point how far a single guaranteeing State is bound under the Treaty of 1839 to maintain Belgian neutrality if the remainder abstain or refuse.

The Cabinet consider that the matter if it arises will be rather one of policy than of legal obligation.

After much discussion it was agreed that Sir E. Grey should be authorised to inform the German and French Ambassadors that at this stage we were unable to pledge ourselves in advance, either under all conditions to stand aside, or in any conditions to join in.

Mr. Churchill described the Naval steps which had already been taken, and it was resolved that the "precautionary stage" had now arrived, and the "warning telegram" should now be sent. This was done immediately after the rising of the Cabinet, i.e. shortly before 2 p.m.

Lord Crewe to the King.

10 Downing Street,
Whitehall, S.W.
August 2nd, 1914.

Lord Crewe presents his humble duty to Your Majesty, and has the honour on behalf of the Prime Minister to submit the report of the Cabinet held at 6-30 this evening.

Sir Edward Grey gave an account of his conversation with Monsieur Cambon, to whom he gave the message of which Lord Crewe informed Your Majesty this afternoon, adding a further statement of the reasons which at the present juncture make it impossible for Your Majesty's Government to send our military force out of the country, without pledging themselves either way for the future.

The precise form of the statement to be made in Parliament to-morrow was not freely discussed, as Your Majesty's Ministers will meet again to-morrow morning. It was agreed, however, that no communication as regards restrictions on the employment of the German Fleet should be made to Germany beforehand, and that when the announcement is made it would be clear that the practical protection of the French coasts that would be involved is not only a recognition of our friendship with France, but is also imperatively required to preserve British interests.

As regards Belgium, it was agreed, without any attempts to state a formula, that it should be made evident that a substantial violation of the neutrality of that country would place us in the situation contemplated as possible by Mr. Gladstone in 1870, when interference with Belgian independence was held to compel us to take action.

Some discussion took place at the close with reference to possible assurance by Your Majesty's Government of certain consignments of wheat in America against war risks, but no action was decided on.

Asquith to the King.

House of Commons,
August 3rd, 1914.

Mr. Asquith with his humble duty to Your Majesty has the honour to report that the Cabinet met to-day.

Its time was exclusively occupied with a consideration of the diplomatic situation and of the statement to be made in the afternoon in the House of Commons by Sir E. Grey. That statement presents, exactly and exhaustively, the case put forward by the Government as the result of the full and anxious Cabinet consultations of the last three days.

At a later meeting of the Cabinet Sir E. Grey communicated to his colleagues the telegram from Brussels to the Belgian Minister here which summarises the German ultimatum.

Mr. Asquith regrets to say that four of his colleagues—Lord Morley, Sir J. Simon, Lord Beauchamp and Mr. Burns—have tendered their resignation. He hopes that some of them may be induced to reconsider their position.

Lord Crewe to the King.

1914
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10 Downing Street,
Whitehall, S.W.
August 3rd, 1914.

Lord Crewe presents his humble duty to Your Majesty, and has the honour to state on behalf of the Prime Minister that at the Cabinet held this morning a general discussion took place on the Parliamentary situation and the immediate steps necessary in view of the financial measures now proposed, and of the calling out of the Reserves. The details were not of a character to make it necessary for Lord Crewe to submit an oral report to Your Majesty to-day, but Your Majesty should be informed that although Lord Morley did not attend the Cabinet, and it is feared that he adheres to his determination to resign his office in Your Majesty's service, Lord Beauchamp and the Attorney General were present, and it is hoped that the somewhat altered circumstances have caused them to reconsider the opinion which they entertained yesterday

To these records may now be added Asquith's own *Contemporary Notes* (already published in his *Memories and Reflections* [1]) which carry up to the morning Cabinet of 2nd August:

July 26. No one can say what is going to happen in the East of Europe. The news this morning is that Servia has capitulated on the main point, but it is very doubtful if any reservation will be accepted by Austria. The curious thing is that on many, if not most, of the points Austria has a good and Servia a very bad case, but the Austrians are quite the stupidest people in Europe. There is a brutality about their mode of procedure which will make most people think that this is a case of a big Power wantonly bullying a little one. Anyhow, it is the most dangerous situation of the last forty years. It may incidentally have the effect of throwing into the background the lurid pictures of civil war in Ulster.

July 29. The Amending Bill and the whole Irish business are, of course, put into the shade by the coming war, for it now seems as if nothing but a miracle could avert it. After dinner I went across to E. Grey and sat with him and Haldane till 1 a.m., talking over the situation and trying to discover bridges and outlets. It is one of the ironies of the case that we, being the only Power who has made so much as a constructive suggestion in the direction of peace, are blamed by both Russia and Germany for causing the outbreak of war.

July 30. We had another turn of the kaleidoscope to-day. I was sitting in the Cabinet room with a map of Ulster and a lot of statistics about populations and religions, endeavouring to get into something like shape my speech on the Amending Bill, when a telephone message came from Bonar Law to ask me to go and see him and Carson at his Kensington abode. He had sent his motor which I boarded, and in due time arrived at my destination. I found the two gentlemen there, and Bonar Law proceeded to propose in the interests of the international situation that we should postpone for the time being the second reading of the Amending

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[1] II, 5–9.

1914 Age 61 Bill. He thought that to advertise our domestic dissensions at this moment would weaken our influence in the world for peace. Carson said that at first he had thought it impossible to agree, as it would strain still further the well-known and much tried patience of his Ulstermen, but he had come to see that it was now a patriotic duty. I, of course, welcomed this attitude, but said I would consult my colleagues before giving a definite answer. When I got back I saw Lloyd George and Grey, and we agreed that it was right to close with the offer. Redmond, whom I saw afterwards, thought it an excellent chance of putting off the Amending Bill. The City, which is in a terrible state of depression and paralysis, is for the time being all against English intervention. The prospect is very black.

July 31. We had a Cabinet at 11 and a very interesting discussion, especially about the neutrality of Belgium and the point upon which everything will ultimately turn—are we to go in or stand aside? Of course everybody longs to stand aside, but I need not say that France, through Cambon, is pressing strongly for a reassuring declaration. Edward Grey had an interview with him this afternoon, which he told me was rather painful. He had, of course, to tell Cambon, for we are under no obligation, that we could give no pledges and that our actions must depend upon the course of events, including the Belgian question and the direction of public opinion here.

August 1. When most of them had left, Sir W. Tyrrell arrived with a long message from Berlin to the effect that the German Ambassador's efforts for peace had been suddenly arrested and frustrated by the Tsar's decree for a complete Russian mobilization. We all set to work, Tyrrell, Bongie,[1] Drummond and myself, to draft a direct personal appeal from the King to the Tsar. When we had settled it I called a taxi, and, in company with Tyrrell, drove to Buckingham Palace at about 1.30 a.m. The King was hauled out of bed, and one of my strangest experiences was sitting with him, clad in a dressing gown, while I read the message and the proposed answer.

There was really no fresh news this morning. Lloyd George, all for peace, is more sensible and statesmanlike for keeping the position still open. Grey declares that if an out-and-out and uncompromising policy of non-intervention at all costs is adopted, he will go. Winston very bellicose and demanding immediate mobilization. The main controversy pivots upon Belgium and its neutrality. We parted in fairly amicable mood, and are to sit again at 11 to-morrow, Sunday. I am still not quite hopeless about peace, though far from hopeful, but if it comes to war, I feel sure we shall have a split in the Cabinet. Of course if Grey went I should go and the whole thing would break up. On the other hand, we may have to contemplate, with such equanimity as we can command, the loss of Morley and possibly, though I do not think it, of Simon.

August 2. Things are pretty black. Germany is now in active war with both Russia and France, and the Germans have violated the neutrality of Luxembourg. We are waiting to know whether they are going to do the same with Belgium. I had a visit at breakfast from Lichnowsky, who was very *emotionné* and implored me not to side with France. He said that Germany, with her army cut in two between France and Russia, was far more likely to be crushed than France. He was very agitated, poor man, and wept. I told him that we had no desire to intervene, and that it rested largely with Germany to make intervention impossible if she would (1) not invade Belgium, and (2) not send her fleet into the Channel to attack the unprotected north coast of France. He was bitter about the policy of his Government in not restraining Austria and seemed quite heart-broken. 1914 Age 61

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[1] Sir Maurice Bonham Carter, Lord Oxford's private secretary.

Then we had a long Cabinet from 11 till nearly two, which very soon revealed that we are on the brink of a split. We agreed at last with some difficulty that Grey should be authorised to tell Cambon that our fleet would not allow the German fleet to make the Channel a base of hostile operations. John Burns at once resigned, but was persuaded to hold on at any rate till the evening when we meet again. There is a strong party against any kind of intervention in any event. Grey, of course, will never consent to this, and I shall not separate myself from him. Crewe, McKenna and Samuel are a moderating intermediate body. Bonar Law writes that the Opposition will back us up in any measure we may take for the support of France and Russia. I suppose a good number of our own party in the House of Commons are for absolute non-interference. It will be a shocking thing if at such a moment we break up.

Happily I am quite clear in my mind as to what is right and wrong. (1) We have no obligation of any kind either to France or Russia to give them military or naval help. (2) The dispatch of the Expeditionary Force to help France at this moment is out of the question and would serve no object. (3) We must not forget the ties created by our long-standing and intimate friendship with France. (4) It is against British interests that France should be wiped out as a Great Power. (5) We cannot allow Germany to use the Channel as a hostile base. (6) We have obligations to Belgium to prevent it being utilized and absorbed by Germany.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE ENTRY INTO WAR

The common ground in the Cabinet—The limits of non-intervention—The question of Belgium—Policy or legal obligation ? A question to France and Germany—The Germans marching on Belgium—Sunday, August 2, the decisive day—The German Fleet and the English Channel—The Assurance to France—Resignation of Lord Morley and Mr. John Burns—Attitude of the Belgian Government—Meeting of the Peace Group of Ministers—The Unionist assurance—The " Substantial Violation " and the Belgian decision to resist—Rally of the Cabinet—Sir Edward Grey's speech—The all-but unanimous decision.

J. A. S.

1914 Age 61 ASQUITH's own records and other contemporary documents have been printed without comment in the previous chapter, but with their aid and the help of surviving witnesses, an effort may now be made to trace the course of events and the action of individuals within the Cabinet.

The history of the diplomacy of those days has often been told and cannot be repeated here, but certain landmarks must be borne in mind. The Austro-Serbian quarrel developed rapidly to embrace all the Powers. On Tuesday, 28th July, Austria declared war on Serbia and proceeded at once to bombard Belgrade and invade the country. On Thursday, 30th July, Russia replied by a partial mobilisation which was extended at midnight the same day to the whole Army. Austria about the same time proceeded to complete her mobilisation, but in spite of these military measures negotiations still continued. On Friday, 31st July, the Germans issued a proclamation of Kriegsgefahr (war danger) which was followed quickly by mobilisation, and at midnight on the 31st, presented an ultimatum to Russia. On Saturday, 1st August, the French mobilised, and on the morning of Sunday, 2nd August, the Germans began their offensive with the occupation of Luxembourg, which clearly indicated their intention of invading Belgium. On Monday, 3rd August, Germany declared war upon France.

In the earlier Cabinets no question arose which could divide Ministers. They were unanimous in approving the Foreign Secretary's efforts to keep peace ; they agreed without difficulty (27th

July) to the precautionary measures taken, the warning messages to the Dominion and Colonial Governments, the orders postponing the dispersal of the Fleet, and (29th July) the warning telegrams to Army and Navy. But while willing that the Germans should be cautioned against reckoning on British neutrality, the great majority were firm against giving France and Russia the guarantee of support for which M. Cambon was daily imploring, and strongly favoured the use of British influence to urge moderation on both these Powers. Up to 31st July, the ruling hypothesis was that of a straight fight between the European Alliances; and upon that ground it was the view, if not of the majority, at least of a party strong enough to break the Government, that there were no commitments, legal or moral, requiring us to intervene in this continental struggle, and that public support would not be forthcoming for a war ostensibly in support of Russia in her quarrel with Austria about Serbia.

To retain full liberty up to the last moment, and to make it clear that, if war came and British intervention were decided upon, it was only on the most compelling proof that duty and necessity required it both Asquith and Sir Edward Grey thought at this stage to be the one and only way of securing national unity. This line, while preventing Sir Edward Grey from giving the French Ambassador the assurance which he so naturally desired, and the King from answering in more definite terms the personal appeal made to him by the President of the French Republic, did not prevent Sir Edward from warning the Germans that British intervention was a possibility to be reckoned with, nor from indignantly repelling the German bid for neutrality at the expense of France. Sir Edward Grey has related how on the morning of 30th July, he wrote the dispatch conveying his answer to this proposal and took it over to Asquith at 10 Downing Street, and how they agreed together that it should be sent at once without waiting for the Cabinet which was to meet in the afternoon, since they were "certain that the Cabinet would agree (as it did) that this bid for neutrality could not be accepted."[1] This may be taken as marking the limit of the intervention which the Cabinet contemplated on 30th July, and helps to the understanding of what was in its mind when on that day it "authorised Sir Edward Grey to inform the French and German Ambassadors that at this stage we were unable to pledge ourselves in advance either under all conditions to stand aside or in any conditions to join in."

But from the beginning, Ministers had been obliged to consider another hypothesis, which had run through all the military conversations and provisional arrangements of previous years, viz. that in attacking France, Germany would violate the neutrality of Belgium; and the Cabinet letter of 30th July (Thursday) records that on the previous day Ministers "reviewed the obligation of this country in regard to the neutrality (of Luxembourg and Belgium) arising out of the two Treaties of April, 1839, and the action which was taken by Mr. Gladstone's Government in August, 1870"; and concluded that it was "a doubtful point how far a single guaranteeing State is bound under the Treaty of 1839 to maintain Belgian neutrality if the remainder abstains or refuses." The Cabinet, therefore, at this stage considered that "the matter, if it arose, would be rather one of policy than of legal obligation," a view which, as Lord Grey has recorded, was modified after further consideration of the legal aspects of the case. On the following day (Friday, 31st July) Grey addressed a request to the French and German Governments asking each for an assurance that it would respect the neutrality of Belgium, so long as no other Power violated it. France, to whom the question had been put only as a matter of form, of course agreed,[1] but the German answer was both evasive and ominous.[2] In the meantime Russia, Austria, and Germany had mobilised (July 30th and 31st) and on Saturday, 1st August, Germany declared war on Russia, an act which automatically made France her enemy; and, according to the information which now came to the Government, it was highly probable that she intended to march on France through Belgium.

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[1] *Twenty-five Years*, II, pp. 327–329.

The legal argument on the Belgian question has been set out by Lord Grey,[3] and its details need not be repeated. Though bringing into stronger and stronger relief the binding character of

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[1] Dispatch from Sir Francis Bertie to Sir Edward Grey: "French Government are resolved to respect the neutrality of Belgium, and it would only be in the event of some other Power violating that neutrality that France might find herself under the necessity, in order to assure defence of her own security, to act otherwise. This assurance has been given several times. President of the Republic spoke of it to the King of the Belgians, and the French Minister at Brussels has spontaneously renewed the assurance to the Belgian Minister for Foreign Affairs to-day." White Paper, 125.

[2] Dispatch from Sir Edward Goschen to Sir Edward Grey (31st July): "I have seen Secretary of State who informs me that he must consult the Emperor and the Chancellor before he can possibly answer. I gathered from what he said that he thought any reply they might give could not but disclose a certain amount of their plan of campaign in the event of war ensuing, and he was therefore very doubtful whether they would return any answer at all. His Excellency, nevertheless, took note of your request.

It appears from what he said the German Government consider that certain hostile acts have already been committed by Belgium. As an instance of this, he alleged that a consignment of corn destined for Germany had been placed under an embargo already." British Documents XI, pp. 234–235.

[3] *Twenty-five Years*, II, p. 3 *et seq.*

MARGOT ASQUITH AND H. H. A. AT WALMER CASTLE, 1914

the guarantee of Belgian neutrality, it offered a certain foothold to those who urged that action was not obligatory on one of the guarantors, if the others defaulted, and the argument went backwards and forwards on that ground on 31st July and 1st August. Belgium now overlapped the general issue but up to this point it was still only a hypothesis that the Germans would invade Belgium. On the Sunday morning (2nd August) the news came that they had invaded Luxembourg, and there was no longer any reasonable doubt that they intended to march on France through Belgium.

II

Sunday, 2nd August, was thus the decisive day for the British Cabinet. The hypothesis was now a staring reality, and it was clear to Asquith that the Government must make up its mind before the day was out. His own mind was already made up that he would act in the end with Sir Edward Grey against the strong party which up to that time had opposed intervention of any kind, but he was resolved not to force the issue, so long as there was a chance of bringing the Cabinet together on the Belgian, if not on the more general, ground. This was all but achieved before the Sunday was out, and German action now did what probably nothing else could have done.

The Cabinet met twice on this Sunday, once in the morning, and again at 6-30 in the evening. At the morning meeting, Ministers agreed, with two dissentients, Lord Morley and Mr. John Burns, to authorize Sir Edward Grey to tell the French Ambassador that we should not permit the German fleet to make the Channel a base of hostile operations. Mr. Burns, as Asquith records, at once tendered his resignation, but was induced to withhold it until the evening sitting. When the Cabinet met again at 6-30, Sir Edward reported that he had given this assurance to M. Cambon, whereupon Mr. Burns resigned, but Lord Morley agreed to "sleep on it." Lord Morley did not attend another meeting, and to a final appeal which Asquith made to him the following day, he answered that poignant to him as was "the idea of severing affectionate associations" he could not conceal from himself that "we—I and the leading men in the Cabinet—do not mean the same thing in the foreign policy of the moment."

For the other dissentients Belgium proved in the end to be the deciding factor, but there was still a doubt which weighed heavily with some of them. Would Belgium resist or would she, like

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Luxembourg, submit after registering her protest with the Powers? In the latter event we could not, they argued, be more Belgian than the Belgians or compel them to submit to the horrors which forcible resistance would inflict on them, for our convenience or that of France and Russia. To force her to yield her territory as the battle-ground of the European Armageddon would be a crime, and the more so as we were not in a position to offer her the immediate succour which she would need, if she decided to resist. The Peace group were strong on the point that a "simple traverse" of a corner of Belgium by German troops would not be a cause of British intervention, and until the Sunday evening, they were fortified in this attitude by the reply which the Belgian Government made to the French offer of support:

> "We are sincerely grateful to the French Government for offering eventual support. In the actual circumstances, however, we do not propose to appeal to the guarantee of the Powers. Belgian Government will decide later on the action they may think it necessary to take."[1]

Lord Morley has related how after the morning Cabinet on this day a group of Ministers met at Lord Beauchamp's house, and were "pretty stalwart" against being drawn in to what they still regarded as a "Russian or Central European quarrel." Lord Morley's memory of what took place on this occasion differs in some respects from that of others who were present, and he appears to have misunderstood the attitude of one or two who took part in it.[2] But up to this point there was beyond doubt still an influential group which was very far from convinced that war, even on the Belgian issue, was a necessity.

On the Sunday morning Asquith had in his possession the letter from the Opposition leaders in which they promised their support to the Government in resisting German aggression. This was no doubt a valuable assurance, since up to this point the expressions of doubt and anxiety had by no means been confined to members of the Liberal Party. In the previous week Mr. Bonar Law had told Lord Grey he doubted whether the rank and file of the Unionist Party would be "unanimous or overwhelmingly in favour of war" unless Belgian neutrality were invaded,[1] and nowhere had there been greater alarm at the threat of war than in banking and financial circles of the conservative City of London. But for the particular task which Asquith now had in hand—that of resolving the doubts of his Liberal and Radical colleagues—such a communication could scarcely weigh much in the scales, and it played no great part in the discussions of this day.

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[1] This reply, it appeared afterwards, was due to the desire of the Belgian Government not to give the Germans the slightest excuse for alleging that they themselves had departed from neutrality by taking sides with France before Germany had entered Belgian territory.

[2] Memorandum on Resignation, pp. 14–15. The Ministers whose names Lord Morley mentions were Lord Beauchamp, Sir John Simon, Mr. Lloyd George, Mr. Harcourt, Mr. Herbert Samuel, Mr. Pease, Mr. McKinnon Wood, Mr. Runciman and himself.

III

All through Sunday, 2nd August, the Germans were marching, and by 6.30 in the evening, when the Cabinet met again, it was quite certain that they were about to invade Belgium, and almost certain that the Belgians would resist. After Sir Edward Grey had reported the result of the communication to M. Cambon which had been authorised at the morning sitting, the Belgian question was taken up once more and for the last time, and after "heavy wrestling" it was agreed, as Lord Crewe reported to the King, "that it should be made evident that a substantial violation of the neutrality of that country would place us in the situation contemplated as possible by Mr. Gladstone in 1870 when interference with Belgian independence was held to compel us to take action."

There were still loopholes. It might still be argued that the violation was not "substantial," or that it did not interfere with Belgian independence, and several Ministers still clutched at these possibilities on the Sunday evening after the Cabinet had risen. But for the great majority the decision was taken that, if Belgium resisted, our entry into the war would be imperative. Men who had objected to the last to our being drawn into a "Russian or Central European quarrel" and who were even willing to make terms with an unresisted "traverse" of Belgium, could not bring themselves to face the possibility of her standing manfully against her invader and appealing to us in vain for the help which we were honourably bound to give her. To offer men in this extremity the "armed neutrality" and "energetic diplomatising" which Lord Morley recommended as the proper course for a British Government seemed by this time very nearly mockery.

The Germans marched through the night of 2nd August, and the Belgians who had mobilised on the last day of July pushed feverishly forward with their preparations to resist them. When the Cabinet met again (Monday, 3rd August) the facts were beyond question,

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[1] *Twenty-five Years*, I, p. 337.

1914 Age 61 and the argument was not renewed. Ministers now occupied themselves in deciding the general form in which Sir Edward Grey should convey the decision of the Government to the House of Commons in the afternoon and the immediate steps necessary to prepare for the war which was now imminent. Before the morning was out the King of the Belgians had telegraphed to King George appealing for British assistance :

> Mindful of the numerous marks of friendship of Your Majesty and of Your Majesty's predecessors, as well as the friendly attitude of Great Britain in 1870, and of the proofs of sympathy which she has once again shown us, I make the supreme appeal to the diplomatic intervention of Your Majesty's Government to safeguard the neutrality of Belgium.

The King of the Belgians was of course aware that with the German armies on the march, diplomatic intervention on our part could bring nothing but a rebuff which would require us to take up the challenge. To attempt to impose conditions on Germany meant, as Sir Edward Grey told the Cabinet, war, just as surely as a declaration of war.

Imaginative pictures have been drawn of the Cabinet on this Monday morning—how it was still debating the issue and still in doubt when the letter from the King of the Belgians was delivered, and swept the waverers off their feet, and how under the influence of this emotion Ministers there and then drafted the ultimatum which was despatched to Germany the same evening. None of this is in the records or in the memory of the survivors. On Monday, 3rd August, the Cabinet confined itself to giving its assent or, as Mr. Churchill says, " a predominant assent," to the principal points and general tone of the statement which Sir Edward Grey was to make in the House of Commons that afternoon. Even while Sir Edward was speaking Ministers generally were unaware how many of their colleagues had resigned or would persist in their resignations, and it was not known until after the House had risen that Sir John Simon and Lord Beauchamp had decided to remain. Of the following day's Cabinet Asquith's record in his *Aides Memoires* is simply :

> Aug. 4. . . . We had an interesting Cabinet, as we got news that the Germans had entered Belgium and had announced that if necessary they would push their way through by force of arms. This simplifies matters. So we sent the Germans an ultimatum to expire at midnight requesting them to give a like assurance with the French that they would respect Belgian neutrality. . . . The whole thing fills me with sadness. The House took the fresh news to-day very calmly and with a good deal of dignity."[1]

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[1] *Memories and Reflections*, II, p. 21

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Mr. Churchill's memory is that the "supreme decisions" (to send an ultimatum to Germany and to declare war upon Germany) "were never taken at any Cabinet. They were compelled by the force of events to rest on the authority of the Prime Minister."[1] There is curiously no letter to the King recording the Cabinet of 4th August, but the recollection of the survivors is that the drafting of the ultimatum was left to Asquith and Grey, and that the consequential steps were taken for granted.

. . . .

The Autobiography of Margot Asquith supplies a more intimate touch; the scene is the same day in the Prime Minister's room in the House of Commons:

> "'So it is all up?' I said.
> He answered without looking at me:
> 'Yes, it's all up.'
> I sat down beside him with a feeling of numbness in my limbs, and absently watched through the half-open door the backs of moving men. A secretary came in with Foreign Office boxes, he put them down and went out of the room.
> Henry sat at his writing-table leaning back, with a pen in his hand. . . . What was he thinking of? . . . His sons? . . . My son was too young to fight; would they all have to fight? . . . I got up and leant my head against his; we could not speak for tears."[2]

. . . .

The Ultimatum was a communication to which no answer was expected. Late that night Asquith sat in the Cabinet room with his wife and two or three intimate colleagues keeping watch while the sands ran out. Sir Edward Grey was there with Sir William Tyrrell to certify the silence of Berlin; Mr. Churchill also waiting, for the moment to flash the war order to the Fleet. The hour struck and the country was at war.

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[1] *World Crisis*, 1911–1914, p. 220.

[2] Vol. II, p. 195.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE ENTRY INTO WAR—(*Continued*)

The doubters and their change of mind—Belgium and public opinion—Old men and young men—The Prime Minister and Cabinet unity—Against forcing the issue—Reasons for hesitation—Doubts about Russia—Uncertainty about Belgium—The suggested notification of British policy—Why it was impossible—Would it have been wise ?—The Belgian issue—Lord Morley's view—Reasons for rejecting it—The part played by secret diplomacy—Asquith's view—His interpretation of British freedom to act—Asquith's part as Prime Minister—His coolness and impatience of panic. J. A. S.

1914 Age 61 LORD MORLEY has suggested that the Ministers with whom he had acted in resisting war " veered with the wind " at the last moment. This was never Asquith's opinion. He held that men who had been opposed to intervention while they thought that Belgium would not resist might reasonably and honourably take a different view when they knew that she had determined to resist, and was calling for the fulfilment of our guarantee to support her. These were the " altered circumstances " of which the Cabinet letter of 3rd August makes mention. But there was undoubtedly a strong shift of opinion which had its weight with Ministers when it became known to the public that Germany was about to invade Belgium. A wave of indignation passed over the country and carried with it a great mass of men and women who would only with the greatest difficulty have been reconciled to a war of interest or policy, but who now felt the call of chivalry and duty. From all parts of the country it was reported that the peace movement had been arrested, and the great anti-war demonstration planned for Sunday, 2nd August, in Trafalgar Square proved but a feeble effort. It has been suggested in after years that a Cabinet of old men drove the youth of the country blindfold into a war which they would have declined if they had known the facts. Asquith's Ministry was composed for the most part of men who were relatively young, and the great majority of whom were, as Mr. Churchill has said, " overwhelmingly pacific." But if they had shirked what was universally held to be the direct challenge of German militarism, they would have had no sterner reckoning than with the young men of the country.

According to the manner of the time the Cabinet records are scanty and no detailed reconstruction after the event is possible.

But certain impressions gleaned from the recollections of colleagues may properly find a place here. There is general agreement that Asquith's first preoccupation was to keep the Cabinet and the party—which meant keeping the nation—together. His task was to deal not with two minds but with many minds and the impressions made on them by the constantly shifting course of events. Any attempt to classify opinions which were necessarily in this sense fluid would do injustice to individuals, but roughly it may be said that when the trouble began there was on one side a small party which held that, if Germany attacked France, both honour and policy would require us to intervene, and on the other side a small party which was equally clear that in no circumstances ought we to intervene. Between the two, the main body of the Cabinet held that we were under no moral obligation to intervene in a war between the European Alliances, that it would be impolitic to do so unless we were attacked or until the course of events compelled intervention in our own interests, and that our commitments to France would be sufficiently met by guaranteeing her coasts against attacks by sea. Asquith was from the beginning of opinion that any attack by Germany on France would involve us in war in a comparatively short time, if not immediately, and he held it to be of supreme importance that the Government and the country should be kept united against this contingency. He "realised," as one of his colleagues[1] puts it, "that the break-up of the Cabinet, involving his own resignation, would mean a war conducted by a Conservative Government, the time being in no way ripe for a Coalition. Such a Government would have encountered no factious opposition from himself or many other Liberals, but the country would have been divided, perhaps irreparably, with an unknown number of people determined to stop the war at the earliest moment. He was, therefore, anxious not to force matters in the Cabinet and not to move ahead of public opinion in the country."

The fearful nature of their responsibility hung heavy upon all members of the Cabinet and all felt the strain. But there is agreement that the debates were grave and temperate even at the tensest moment. Lord Morley's suggestion that Lord Grey said early in the day that he "was not the man for neutrality" is denied by Lord Grey and does not accord with the memory of his colleagues. Neither he nor Asquith ever threatened their colleagues with resignation or attempted to force their hands in any way. There was a great desire among Ministers not to let British policy slip out of

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[1] Lord Crewe.

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British hands. They had insisted again and again in the past three years that the French should understand that we were not committed either by the *Entente* or by the military conversations entered into at moments of crisis to give them military support without exercising our own free judgment as and when the occasion arose. In 1912 they had required that this should be put definitely on record in letters exchanged between Sir Edward Grey and M. Cambon. Having taken these precautions they saw no reason why they should not reap the benefit of them or why they should be told that they were under "moral" or "honourable" obligations which they had expressly disclaimed. They were willing to believe that France was pacific; her statesmen seemed to be acting wisely and coolly and her people were known to be in utter dread of German invasion. But they knew less about Russia and were inclined to overrate her military preparedness. The question was asked: If Russia picked a quarrel with Germany, if France came in, as she would be bound to, and we were committed beforehand to support France, might we not find ourselves encouraging an indefensible act of aggression? This is what, according to the German contention, happened when Russia mobilised, and, though there are good reasons for not thinking it true, the German theory points to a risk which responsible men were bound to take into account.

In the enormous complexity of European politics and the difficulty of weighing its rights and its wrongs, doubts and hesitations about committing the country to a quarrel of which the origins were seemingly remote from British interests were not only natural but well-justified. As Lord Grey has said, if there had not been a peace party in the Cabinet there ought to have been one. Even the question of Belgian neutrality was by no means so simple as it afterwards appeared. In spite of her preparations by strategic railways and concentrations on the frontier it was not certain that Germany would take the enormous risk of multiplying enemies by marching through Belgium; it was not certain that, if she did, Belgium would resist; it was not even quite certain that the apparent threat to Belgium might not be a feint to cover a quite different movement threatening Swiss neutrality. There were some members of the Cabinet like Mr. Lloyd George for whom Belgium was always the predominant topic; there were others for whom the invasion of Belgium was only the clinching fact which proved the fear of Germany to be well-founded and the necessity of resisting her to be imperative.

Opinions and emotion varied from day to day, and debates in

Cabinet were followed by conferences outside, midnight sittings in Ministers' rooms, wrestlings with anxious supporters in the lobbies of the House of Commons, talks with journalists. Rumours of resignations went out from day to day, and to the last moment it seemed probable that the Government would break up. Asquith's plea to doubting colleagues was always to think over it, to sleep over it, to consider and reconsider.

II

It has been suggested in after years that a clear notification by the British Government after the Austrian ultimatum to Serbia, that it would be found on the side of France and Russia if war broke out, would have saved the peace. The above narrative shows why this notification was not given and why it could not be given. The dominant idea of all sections of the Cabinet was that Great Britain alone was in a position to mediate with relative impartiality between the European groups. She had performed this function to complete satisfaction in the previous year, and they hoped that she would be permitted to perform it again in the new crisis. But this rôle required her to remain uncommitted, so long as the slightest hope of peace remained, and necessarily excluded the strong declaration on the side of France and Russia which those Powers naturally desired. It was acknowledged by the Cabinet that the dispositions of the Fleet agreed upon between the two Powers in 1912 involved a moral obligation on Great Britain to defend the northern coasts of France against a German attack. But it was not claimed by the French, and in view of the Grey-Cambon correspondence of that year could not be claimed, that there was any obligation, legal or moral, on the British Government to do more than this; and any attempt on Asquith's or Grey's part to force the issue by pledging support to one side while there was yet a chance of peace by mediation, would beyond doubt have shattered the Cabinet and divided the country. To urge mediation, to keep on urging it, and to exhaust every possibility, however remote or unpromising, of building bridges between the two European groups was what the public expected of a Liberal Government, and the only line on which either Cabinet or national unity could have been secured.

This was so well known to Asquith and Grey that they never contemplated an early declaration on the side of France and Russia as within the bounds of possibility; and the French on their side wisely recognised that any attempt on their part to claim British support as their right would defeat its own object. Asquith's first and last thought was that the decision, when it came, should be a free choice based on British duty and British interests, and he laid stress on the freedom of his Government precisely because he knew that both the Government and the nation would act best if they acted under a sense of unfettered responsibility. The war, if it came, had, in his view, to be recognised as the free act of the nation in pursuance of its honour or vital interests, not as the unconsidered or unintended result of past commitments and entanglements.

The desired declaration was in fact impossible, but in the light of subsequent revelations it may be worth considering whether, if possible, it would have been wise. Would it have restrained Germany or would it have encouraged Russia who, after the Austrian invasion of Serbia, was more and more coming to the conclusion that war was inevitable and just? There were military parties in both countries, and any Government in possession of the facts as we now know them, might have hesitated long before deciding whether the discouragement which would be given to the one would not be more than balanced by the encouragement given to the other.[1] It is even doubtful whether the German military party would have been discouraged, for it persisted in its plan of invading Belgium when it was all but certain that this would lead to British intervention, just as two years later it persisted in the unlimited submarine when it was quite certain that this would bring the United States into the war.

The assumption that this stroke would have saved the peace is, for these reasons, very far from proved, and even if it had been open to him, a British Minister could scarcely have been blamed if he had rejected it on its merits as too doubtful and hazardous. One thing at all events is not open to doubt. Had this policy been adopted and failed, it would have been said in after years, certainly by Germans and Austrians, and perhaps even by some impartial historians, that Great Britain had destroyed the last hope of peace by delivering her policy blindfold into the keeping of Russia at the most critical moment of her negotiations.

III

In the *Contemporary Notes* printed above Asquith wrote on 1st August: "The main controversy now pivots upon Belgium and its neutrality." Lord Morley's *Memorandum on Resignation* which is the only continuous record of these days published so far by a member of Asquith's Cabinet is directed to proving that Belgium played "only a secondary part" throughout the deliberations of the Cabinet. "The precipitate and peremptory blaze about Belgium was," he says, "due less to indignation at the violation of a Treaty than to natural perception of the plea that it would furnish for intervention on behalf of France, for expeditionary force and all the rest. Belgium was to take the place that had been taken before, as pleas for war, by Morocco and Agadir."[1]

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[1] "What must weigh with His Majesty's Government is the consideration that they should not by a declaration of unconditional solidarity with France and Russia *induce* and *determine* these two Powers to choose the path of war."—Note by Sir Eyre Crowe to Dispatch from Sir F. Bertie. July 30th, 1914. British Documents XI, No. 318.

This seems to imply that those members of the Cabinet who were finally convinced that the invasion of Belgium necessitated British action had all along been seeking pleas for "intervention on the side of France," whereas it would be nearer the truth to say that up to the last moment they were seeking grounds to justify non-intervention. The idea that Belgium played a "secondary part" is, in any case, at variance with the records and with the memories of surviving members of the Cabinet. But Asquith never denied that for himself, as for several of his colleagues, the prospect of a German attack on France raised questions of British interests and British policy which might in any event compel our intervention. Undoubtedly he held with Grey that if France were destroyed and Germany were left in control of Belgium and the Channel ports with—possibly—the French fleet added to her own, as one of the spoils of victory, the position of Great Britain and the British Empire would be one of grave peril. There were other members of the Cabinet who shared this view to the extent at all events of holding that a victory of Germany by sea must at all costs be prevented. But Asquith would never have admitted that Belgium held a "secondary place" in his thoughts. He was specially susceptible to appeals to duty and chivalry, and the attack on Belgium moved him to a high pitch of indignation. He saw in it clinching evidence not only of German designs which threatened our interests but of that spirit of Prussian militarism which he felt it to be the duty of this country to resent and resist.

Asquith was always impatient of those who spoke of the war as due to secret diplomacy or undisclosed entanglements. The secrets of Europe, as he saw them, were very open ones; the two great Alliances perpetually menacing each other, the swollen armaments, the Anglo-French *entente*, the rising naval power of Germany, and other things notorious and vitally affecting the interests of Great

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[1] *Memorandum on Resignation*, p. 14

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Britain, for which the responsibility was divided between many Governments and spread over a long period of time. Twice at least since he had become Prime Minister he and his colleagues had had to deal with dangerous crises, not secretly but in the sight of the whole world, and he could with difficulty be brought to believe that men who had shared his responsibility were ignorant of any material fact in British policy. When the last and greatest crisis came, it was not, in his view, an entanglement, but an open clash of forces and ideas, in which Great Britain, however technically free, was bound to make her choice. The question, as he saw it, was not whether she was bound to France, but whether, bound or free, she could possibly remain a spectator while the Central Powers worked their will upon Europe. Arguments there might be on this subject, but they were not arguments derived from the "military conversations," the Grey-Cambon correspondence, or any other confidential transactions between the two Governments. These in his view were not causes but symptoms and consequences of the movement of events which had driven Britain and France together and compelled them to consider the hypothesis of a war waged in common. Each time that hypothesis presented itself, Asquith was strong on the point that Government and Parliament were free to make their choice, but freedom, in his view, did not mean in August 1914 merely, as Lord Morley interpreted it, freedom to stand out; it meant also freedom to decide that duty and interest required us to play our part.

IV

> "The part played by Asquith, as Prime Minister, was of supreme importance; on this all the efforts of individual Ministers depended for their effect. . . . Asquith took no trouble to secure his own position or to add to his personal reputation. When things were going well with his Government he would be careful to see that any colleague got credit, if he were entitled to it, without regard to whether any credit would be given to or left for himself. On the other hand, if things were going badly he was ready to stand in front and accept all responsibility; a colleague who got into trouble was sure that the Prime Minister would stand by him. These qualities are not unique, but Asquith possessed them to a rare degree. It was this that did so much in the agitating days at the end of July to keep the Cabinet together, that made the final decision firm, and that kept things steady in the first shock of disaster. Had it not been for Asquith the outbreak of war might have found us with a Cabinet in disorder or dissolution impotent to take any decision; and when the German armies seemed to be carrying all before them, there might have been oscillation, resort to sudden change or rash expedients that would have spoilt the chance of recovery."[1]

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[1] Grey, *Twenty-five Years*, II, 46, 240–1.

Such is the tribute which twelve years later Lord Grey paid to his old Chief and the records confirm it. The fact that he took no trouble to secure his own position—that he had, so to speak, no party in his own Cabinet—was of the highest value to Asquith in the crisis of 1914. All his colleagues knew that he would deal evenly and fairly between them, that he would not engage in cabals behind their backs, or endeavour to force them to a conclusion against which their judgment or their conscience rebelled. He knew the men he was dealing with—men of exceptional capacity and independent minds—and he judged rightly that they would act best if they felt their choice to be free and their responsibility unfettered. The *festina lente* of his method, which sometimes laid him open to reproach, was on this occasion the only method that could have secured either Cabinet or National unity, and he was probably the only man living who could have practised it with the same success.

The work of the Prime Minister was unceasing during these days. In addition to the Cabinet, there was the Committee of Imperial Defence, which sat continuously putting the finishing touches to the measures necessary on a declaration of war and preparing the ground for military and naval decisions which would need to be taken at once in that event. He saw to it that no measure of this kind was neglected or delayed while the Cabinet was making up its mind. Asquith had spent a good deal of his time in the previous years in either presiding over or following the proceedings of the Committee of Imperial Defence, and he was in close touch with it from the beginning of the crisis. It was also his duty to visit the King and keep him carefully informed, and he was throughout in close consultation with Sir Edward Grey, and accessible to doubting colleagues, anxious M.P.'s and troubled financiers, listening with the same patience to those who wanted instant mobilisation and to those who were peremptory for the hoisting of the white or the neutral flag. He was heard to say that until the test came he had no idea how his colleagues differed from one another in character and temperament, and sometimes he dropped shrewd observations about their behaviour :

> "Winston who has a pictorial mind brimming with ideas is in tearing spirits at the prospect of war, which to me shows a lack of imagination ; Crewe is wise and keeps an even keel ; no one can force Grey's hand, he and I see eye to eye over the whole situation ; Lloyd George is nervous ; Haldane, Samuel, and McKenna very sensible and loyal."

Of the advice which came pouring in from all quarters he said, "All is worth hearing, but not much worth listening to."

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Often he worked far into the morning in the Cabinet room, but at this time his constitution seemed to be of iron, and he rose to the next day's work with unexhausted vitality. If ever his patience broke it was with the makers and spreaders of panic. Lord Morley in his *Memorandum* speaks of a " very remarkable piece of intelligence communicated to the Cabinet " by the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

> " He had been consulting the Governor and Deputy Governor of the Bank of England, other men of light and leading in the City, also cotton men, and steel and coal men in the north of England, in Glasgow, etc., and they were all aghast at the bare idea of our plunging into a European conflict ; how it would break down the whole system of credit with London as its centre, how it would cut up commerce and manufacture—they told him—how it would hit labour and wages and prices, and when winter came, would inevitably produce violence and tumult."

Asquith's comment on this " remarkable piece of intelligence " was somewhat less respectful. He too had had his interviews with business men from the City, and " they are," he said, " the greatest ninnies I ever had to tackle. I found them all in a state of funk like old women chattering over tea-cups in a Cathedral town."[1] He never underrated the effects which a great and prolonged war would have ultimately upon finance and industry, but he had carefully thought out the measures which would need to be taken to avoid chaos and confusion during the period of war, and predicted with confidence that they would prove to be comparatively simple. That there would be violence and tumult he never believed, provided always that the country was convinced of the righteousness and necessity of the war. First and foremost in his mind during these days was the urgent need, if war had to be, of establishing this conviction in the public mind.

Stoical as he might seem, those who were nearest to him knew him to be deeply moved. At the beginning he shared Grey's view that the calamity that threatened would be on such a scale that responsible men must seek any alternative which offered a way of escape from it, and it was only the obduracy of Germans and Austrians in declining the alternatives which convinced him that German militarism was the evil reality that in his subsequent speeches he declared it to be.

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[1] *Autobiography of Margot Asquith*, II, p. 161.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE BEGINNING OF WAR

The War and the House of Commons—Asquith's speech on the Vote of Credit—The dispatch of the Expeditionary Force—A War Council—Appointment of Kitchener as War Secretary—Premature optimism—The retreat from Mons—Sir John French's telegram—Kitchener's mission—Friction between French and Kitchener—The Irish Question again—Renewed recriminations—Passing of the Home Rule Bill—The two pledges. J. A. S.

In the previous week word had been brought to Asquith that at least half the House of Commons was resolutely opposed to participation in the war, but when Sir Edward Grey had finished his speech on the afternoon of Monday, 3rd August, support of the Government was all but unanimous. Men asked what they themselves would have done in like circumstances, and very few could find any answer but that which the Government had given. The most important dissent came from the leader of the Labour Party, who could not bring himself to believe that either the safety or the honour of the country was in danger, and who asked to be assured that, if the conflict was on behalf of Belgium, the Government would "confine it to that question." This was more than offset by the adhesion of Mr. Redmond who in a moving speech spoke of the changed feeling in Ireland wrought by recent events, and assured the Government that they "might to-morrow withdraw every one of their troops from Ireland" in confidence that her coast would be defended by her own armed sons, and that for this purpose "armed Nationalist Catholics in the South would be only too glad to join arms with the armed Protestant Ulstermen in the North." 1914 Age 61

Asquith's own principal contribution was in moving the Vote of Credit on 6th August, when he followed Sir Edward Grey over the whole ground and wrought his hearers to a high pitch of emotion. This will be found in an Appendix to this chapter. During the next week the Defence of the Realm Act and a whole series of measures prepared by the Committee of Imperial Defence and the Public Departments for the state of war were passed through both Houses of Parliament, most of them without amendment at a single sitting.

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On 2nd August Asquith had written in his *Contemporary Notes*, already quoted, "The dispatch of the Expeditionary Force to help France at this moment is out of the question and would serve no object." The qualification "at this moment" is important. On 2nd August it was far from clear what the enemy's plan of campaign was to be, and the French, having miscalculatedbo th his strength and his intentions, were preparing their offensive into Alsace-Lorraine, and still hoping to make that region the principal battle-ground. The development of the German attack through Belgium required all plans to be reconsidered, and made it an imperative necessity to reinforce the French as quickly as possible. Asquith faced up to the new situation at once, but the decision which had to be taken was by no means so easy as it seemed afterwards. It had been one of the principles of orthodox strategy till then that the enemy's fleet must either be disposed of in battle or safely sealed up in its own ports before the army could be transported oversea. Otherwise the army would be liable to serious risks in crossing the sea and the country would be exposed to invasion after denuding itself of its defenders. Thus when the war broke out, the prevailing suppositions were that (1) that the French would hold up the Germans, to whom it was presumed that they would be at least equal in numbers, while the British fleet did its business of defeating or bottling up the German fleet, and (2) when the sea road was secure and invasion on any large scale rendered impossible, the British Expeditionary Force would cross over to France, weigh in at a well-chosen moment, and give the Allies a decisive superiority.

Within a few hours of the declaration of war it became evident that this orderly progress of events could by no means be relied upon. The French protested that they wanted every man that we could give them at the earliest possible moment. The Admiralty said confidently that it was prepared to guarantee the crossing of the Expeditionary Force, and that the Anglo-French flotilla cordon had already taken up its station in the Straits of Dover. The Admiralty was even willing to waive its original stipulation that two Divisions should be left in this country to guard against invasion. The War Office said that it was only awaiting the signal to send all six Divisions of the Expeditionary Force immediately. Thanks to Lord Haldane's work at the War Office, thanks also to the work done in the Committee of Defence on which, it should be said, Mr. Balfour had co-operated most heartily with Asquith and the Liberal members, that Force was designed for precisely this purpose; its equipment was perfect, its mobilisation, its plan of campaign, its time-table had been laboriously worked out to the last details. On the afternoon of 5th August Asquith summoned all the high military and naval commanders with the addition of Lord Roberts and Lord Kitchener to meet him and his principal colleagues at Downing Street. The Commander-in-Chief and the General Staff were unanimous for the immediate dispatch of at least four divisions, and Asquith, whose doubts had been not about the desirability, but about the safety, of this course, agreed without demur. With this backing he was able without much difficulty to overcome the resistance of certain members of the Cabinet who, though unhesitating about the necessity of entering the war, had clung to the belief that our contribution at all events in the early stages might be mainly naval.

On the same day (5th August) Asquith wrote in his *Contemporary Notes*:

> "I have taken an important decision to-day: to give up the War Office and install Kitchener there as an emergency man until the war comes to an end. . . . K. was, to do him justice, not at all anxious to come in, but when it was presented to him as a duty he agreed. It is clearly understood that he has no politics and that his place at Cairo is kept open so that he can return to it when peace comes back. It is a hazardous experiment, but the best in the circumstances, I think."

He had taken the precaution on the morning of the 3rd of stopping Lord Kitchener when he had already embarked on a Channel steamer to return to his post in Egypt in pursuance of instructions given to all officials who happened to be absent on leave. He wished him in any case to be present at the War Council on the 5th. But at that moment he had by no means made up his mind to appoint him Secretary of State for War, and it was not until the afternoon of the 5th after the meeting of the War Council and after careful deliberation with certain of his colleagues that he offered him the appointment. In after days he spoke with some impatience of the claims made by journalists and others to have forced his hands in this matter and asserted emphatically that it was his own deliberate choice uninfluenced by outside pressure. But there was no doubt of its popularity. The newspapers had clamoured for Kitchener, and the public had echoed their cry. All were agreed that the traditional objections to putting a soldier at the head of the War Office should be waived in this time of crisis. Kitchener was hailed as not only a great soldier but a great administrator, tried and proved in both capacities and marked by his fame and his

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achievements to be a leader of the nation in war. The objections were to be renewed later, but the advantages seemed overwhelming at this moment, and there was not a dissentient voice.

II

All four Divisions of the Expeditionary Force crossed to France without hitch between 6th August and 20th August; the fifth followed on 20th August, and the sixth at the beginning of September. For the first fortnight all seemed to be going well or more than well. The Government was praised by all parties for the ease and promptitude with which it had effected the transition from peace to war, for the bold assumption of the necessary powers by the Executive, the absence of panic and confusion, the completeness and efficiency of the measures to maintain credit and prevent financial disorder, the grasp of the situation by both Army and Navy. For this brief period Asquith and his colleagues seemed to have come into their kingdom after years of denunciation and opprobrium. Laborious work done in the Committee of Imperial Defence for just this emergency now found its reward. Asquith accepted these compliments with composure, for he well know there was no more dangerous moment for all men to speak well of him. His mood in these days may be gathered from a letter to his wife who had gone on a short visit to Scotland:

Asquith to his Wife.

10 Downing Street,
Whitehall, S.W.
Tues., Aug. 18th, 1914.

. . . The curtain is lifted to-day, and people begin to realise what an extraordinary thing has been done during the last ten days. The poor old War Office, which has always been a by-word of inefficiency, has proved itself more than up-to-date; for which the credit is mainly due to Haldane and the Committee of Imperial Defence. The Navy too has been admirable; not a single torpedo has slipped through either end of the Channel.

I am disgusted with the optimism of the press and other people, believing all this nonsense about great Belgian victories and the Germans already demoralised or starving and committing suicide. All that has gone on so far—except at Liège—is mere affairs of outposts, and it looks to-day as if the Germans were going to enter and occupy Brussels. The great thing that the Belgians have done is to stop them on their road and throw out the whole of their time-table. Our force is by this time for the most part in its proper place—just south of Maubeuge.

Violet and I dined last night with the Bencks[1] at Stanmore. I lunched to-day at the French Embassy to meet Jules Cambon, with whom I had an interesting talk. He is much quicker and more vivacious than Paul, and expresses himself very well. He says the Kaiser is *vaniteux et poseur*, and was overborne by the Militarists and Bismarckian reactionaries, and by the jealousies of the Crown Prince. He has a very poor opinion of Bethmann Hollweg—*un homme très mediocre—en même temps bourgeois et courtisan—combinaison mauvaise.* He, Jules, told Jagow at their last interview that the Germans would be beaten—conquered as Napoleon was, by *les deux Puissances intangibles*—England and Russia.

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[1] Count Benckendorff, the Russian Ambassador, and his wife.

A letter to his wife the next day contains this passage :

> "Kitchener thinks the Germans are going in for a large enveloping movement which will enable them to have a dash at the French frontier between Lille and Maubeuge. If so, the big battle will not begin for some days. He is very good at these things and predicted this a week ago when all the French officers here declared it was impossible."

Kitchener's prediction proved unpleasantly true. Before the month was out the too sanguine public learnt with consternation that both French and British armies were in full retreat and newspaper reports and rumour spoke of a disaster greatly exceeding that which was admitted in the official reports. Asquith, according to the testimony of all who saw him at this time, kept an unruffled composure, and then, as always, his disposition was to trust the soldiers and to stand between them and any interference with their plans by the Government. But on 30th August he was confronted with an emergency which in his opinion and Kitchener's required instant action on the part of the Government.

On that day Sir John French intimated that he was about to withdraw his army from the fighting line and retire behind the Seine. Students of the voluminous documents on this incident may be left to form their own judgment[1] as to what exactly was in Sir John French's mind at this moment, but what was before Asquith and Kitchener was his own seemingly unambiguous statement in a telegram of 30th August : "I have decided to begin my retirement to-morrow in the morning behind the Seine in a south-westerly direction west of Paris." This, coming after the relatively reassuring messages of the previous days, was a shattering surprise and, as Asquith said in after days,[2] it "filled the whole Cabinet with consternation . . . because the movements which it indicated would in our judgment have amounted in effect to leaving our Allies in the

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[1] *Military History of the War*, Appendix 22, p. 471. See also *Life of Lord Kitchener*, III, pp. 46–56 ; Viscount French of Ypres' *1914*, pp. 94–100 ; Winston Churchill's *World Crisis*, pp. 277–282 ; *Liaison*, by Brig.-Gen. Spears.

[2] Speech in the Connaught Rooms in reply to Lord French, 2nd June, 1919.

1914 Age 61 lurch in the moment of their extreme need; and the consternation which we felt was shared and expressed to us in moving terms by the head of the French Government." When anxious inquiries throughout the day on 31st August had confirmed the first impression, Asquith held a hurried midnight conference with "Kitchener and Winston, McKenna and Jack Pease, and later Lloyd George,"[1] and the decision was unanimous that Kitchener should go at once to France and unravel the situation. A destroyer took him by night to Havre and he was in Paris by midday, and in consultation with Sir John French at the British Embassy in the afternoon. By half-past seven in the evening he was able to report to Asquith that "French's troops are now in the fighting line, where he will remain conforming to the movements of the French army, though at the same time acting with caution to avoid being in any way unsupported by his flanks." It appeared that Sir John French had had some reason to complain of the failure of the French to keep him informed of their movements and that his messages had been coloured by apprehension of what might befall him, if he were left unsupported when they went back. Kitchener's mission helped materially to put communications between the two armies on the sound basis which enabled the Battle of the Marne to be fought in the following week.

"He (Kitchener) is a real sportsman when an emergency offers, and he went straight home to change his clothes, and started by special train from Charing Cross about 1.30 this morning." So Asquith records on 1st September. But if Kitchener changed his clothes he changed into the wrong clothes, and from that vexatious consequences followed. "If Lord Kitchener," says Mr. Churchill, "had gone in plain clothes, no difficulty would have arisen, but his appearance in Paris in the uniform of a Field Marshal senior to the Commander-in-Chief at that dark and critical moment, wounded and disconcerted Sir John French deeply and not unnaturally. I laboured my utmost to put this right and to make it clear that the Cabinet and not Lord Kitchener were responsible."[2] The point of military symbolism, and its importance at that dark and critical moment had not, it is to be feared, occurred to Asquith and the Cabinet, or even, it appears, to Lord Kitchener himself. But this visit and the incidents accompanying it rankled for months to come and produced a state of friction between Kitchener and French which gave the Prime Minister no little trouble during the coming year. The point of etiquette marked in the military mind the confusion between the functions of War Secretary and Commander-in-Chief (and even between the civilian and the military spheres) which the appointment of a Field Marshal to the former place was likely to produce. Doubts and suspicions on this subject could not be allayed even by Mr. Churchill's adroit diplomacy, and in November we find Asquith writing with his own hand to soothe Sir John and check the mischief-making which was apparently going on between him and Kitchener:

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[1] *Memories and Reflections*, II, p. 30.

[2] *World Crisis*, p. 277.

Asquith to Sir John French.

10 Downing Street,
Whitehall, S.W.1.
Nov. 6th, 1914.

My dear Sir John,

I have just seen F. Guest. I cannot believe there is even a shadow of foundation for what has been reported to you.

I see Lord Kitchener every day, and we talk with the utmost freedom, and I can assure you he never fails in appreciation of and loyalty to you.

As the head of the Government I wish you to know that you possess in the fullest measure our absolute and unreserved confidence, that we watch with ever unceasing admiration your conduct of this arduous campaign, and we think the country fortunate in having at the head of the gallant forces, a Commander who has never been surpassed in the capital qualities of initiative, tenacity, serenity, and resource.

Believe me always,
Very sincerely yours,
H. H. Asquith.

F.M. Sir John French.

III

Though the War was now in full blast, the Irish question was still on Asquith's hands, and much of his time was occupied during the first few weeks in trying to reach an agreement between parties as to the proper method of dealing with the Home Rule Bill. He had hoped that after the rally of the Irish Party to the national cause, some response might have been made from the Unionist side and the few gaps left by the Buckingham Palace Conference have been bridged in an agreed settlement to come into force as soon as the War was over. But the Unionist leaders would have nothing less than that the Home Rule Bill should be re-submitted to whatever Parliament there might be at the end of the War—to which the Irish naturally objected that they would be in a far worse position than if there had been no war. The King again offered his services to procure accommodation and commented with some severity

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upon the obstinacy of politicians who prolonged these recriminations in a time of national crisis, but whenever accommodation was attempted the "old bother about Tyrone and those infernal snippets of Fermanagh and Derry popped up again," as Asquith records in his diary, and after much fruitless talk behind the scenes, he was driven back on his own plan of placing the Irish Bill together with the Welsh Disestablishment Bill on the Statute Book under the Parliament Act, but attaching to them a suspensory Bill deferring their operation for twelve months or a later date to be fixed by order in Council, if the War was not over by that time. To this he added two pledges on behalf of the Government, (1) that before the Irish Bill came into operation Parliament should have the fullest opportunity of passing an Amending Bill, such as had been contemplated when the War broke out, and (2) that the Government would not countenance or consent to the use of force for the coercion of Ulster.

The Suspensory Bill was passed in a single sitting, the whole Opposition walking out after their leader, Mr. Bonar Law, had made an extremely vitriolic speech in which among other things he quoted and flung back at Asquith a passage from the speech in August in which he had charged the Germans with bad faith in violating Belgian neutrality.

Asquith has left his own record of the scene,[1] and it need not be repeated here. He had so often been the target of this invective that the repetition of it hardly ruffled his composure, but in after years he marked this occasion as one of the many lost opportunities in the handling of the Irish question. He was thinking at this time not only of saving his own Bill, but of winning Irish support for the War, and disarming Irish hostility in the United States and the Dominions. The survival into the War of these pre-war animosities was, in his view, one of the principal contributing causes of the Irish Rebellion in 1916, and the course of events which in the subsequent years led to much more drastic solutions than were dreamt of by any of the parties, Irish or British, at this time.

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[1] *Memories and Reflections*, pp. 32–33.

APPENDIX

The following is the speech which Mr. Asquith made in moving the Vote of Credit for the War on August 6th, 1914 :

In asking the House to agree to the resolution I do not propose, because I do not think it is any way necessary, to traverse the ground again which was covered by my right hon. friend the Foreign Secretary two or three nights ago. He stated, and I do not think any of the statements he made are capable of answer, and certainly have not yet been answered, the ground upon which the utmost reluctance and infinite regret His Majesty's Government have been compelled to put this country into a state of war with what for many years, and, indeed, generations past, has been a friendly Power. But, Sir, the Papers which have since been presented to Parliament and are now in the hands of members will, I think, show how strenuous, how unremitting, how persistent even when the last glimmer of hope seemed to have faded away, were the efforts of my right hon. friend to secure for Europe an honourable and lasting peace. Everyone knows that in the great crisis which occurred last year in the East of Europe it was largely, if not mainly, by the acknowledgment of all Europe, due to the steps taken by my right hon. friend, that the area of the conflict was limited, and that so far as the Great Powers were concerned peace was maintained. If his efforts on this occasion have unhappily been less successful I am certain that this House and the country, and I will add posterity and history, will accord to him what is, after all, the best tribute that can be paid to any statesman : That, never derogating for an instant or by an inch from the honour and interests of his own country, he has striven as few men have striven to maintain and preserve that which is the greatest of interests in all countries—universal peace.

But, Sir, these Papers show something more than that. They show what were the terms which were offered to us in exchange for our neutrality.

I trust not only the members of this House, but all our fellow-subjects everywhere will read, learn, and mark the communications which passed only a week ago to-day between Berlin and London on this subject. The terms upon which it was sought to buy our neutrality are contained in the communication made by the German Chancellor to Sir Edward Goschen on July 29th, No. 85 of the published Papers. I think I must refer to them for a moment. After referring to the state of affairs between Austria and Russia, Sir Edward Goschen proceeds : " He then proceeded to make the following strong bid for British neutrality. He said that it was clear so far as he was able to judge the main principle which governed British policy, that Great Britain would never stand by and allow France to be crushed in any conflict there might be. That, however, was not the object at which Germany aimed. Provided the neutrality of Great Britain were certain every assurance would be given to the British Government that the Imperial Government aimed at no territorial acquisitions at the expense of France should they prove victorious in any war that might ensue."

Sir Edward Goschen proceeded to put a very pertinent question: "I questioned His Excellency about the French colonies." What do the French colonies mean? They mean every part of the dominions and possessions of France outside the geographical area of France. "He said he is unable to give a similar undertaking in that respect."

Let me come to what in this matter to my mind, speaking for myself personally, has always been a crucial and almost the governing consideration—namely, the position of the small States. He said: "As regards Holland, so long as Germany's adversaries respected the integrity and neutrality of the Netherlands Germany was ready to give His Majesty's Government an assurance that she would do likewise." Then we come to Belgium. "It depended upon the action of France which operations Germany might be forced to enter upon in Belgium, but when the war was over Belgian integrity would be respected if she had not decided against Germany." Let the House observe the distinction between these two cases. In regard to Holland, not only independence and integrity, but neutrality; but in regard to Belgium no mention of neutrality at all, but an assurance that after the war came to an end the integrity of Belgium would be respected. Then His Excellency added that "ever since he had been Chancellor the object of his policy had been to bring about an understanding with England; he trusted that these assurances might form the basis of that understanding which he so much desired." What does that amount to? Let me just ask the House. I do so not with the object of inflaming passion, and certainly not with the object of exciting feeling against Germany, but I do so to vindicate and make clear the position of the British Government and of Great Britain in this matter.

What did that proposal amount to? In the first place it meant thus, that behind the back of France, which was not to be made a party to these communications at all, we should have given, if we had assented to them, free licence to Germany to annex in the event of a successful war the whole of the extra-European dominions and possessions of France. What did it mean as regards Belgium? Belgium, when she addressed, as she did address in these last days, her moving appeal to us to fulfil our solemn guarantee of her neutrality, what reply should we have given? What reply could we have given to that Belgian appeal? We should have been obliged to say that without her knowledge we had bartered away to the Power that was threatening her our obligation to keep our plighted word.

Sir, the House has read, and the country has read, in the course of the last few hours, the most pathetic address by the King of the Belgians to his people. I do not envy the man who could read that appeal with unmoved heart. The Belgians are fighting, they are losing their lives. What would have been the position of Great Britain to-day in the face of that spectacle if we had assented to this infamous proposal?

Yes, and what were we to get in return? For the betrayal of our friends and the dishonour of our obligations, what were we to get in return? We were to get a promise—nothing more—as to what Germany would be in certain eventualities, a promise, be it observed—I am sorry to have to say it, but it must be put on record—a promise given by a Power which was at that very moment announcing its intention to violate its own Treaty obligations and inviting us to do the same. I can only say, if we had even dallied or temporised with such an offer, we, as a Government, should have covered ourselves with dishonour. We should have betrayed the interests of this country of which we are the trustees.

I am glad to turn to the reply which my right hon. friend made, and from which I will read to the House one or two of the more salient passages, because of this document, No. 101, put on record a week ago the attitude of the British Government and, as I believe, of the British people. My right hon. friend says: "His Majesty's Government cannot for a moment entertain the Chancellor's proposal that they should bind themselves to neutrality on such terms. What he asks us in effect is to engage to stand by while French colonies are taken and France is beaten so long as Germany does not take French territory as distinct from the colonies. From the material point of view"—my right hon. friend, as he always does, uses very temperate language—"such a proposal is unacceptable, for France, without further territory in Europe being taken from her, could be so crushed as to lose her position as a Great Power and become subordinate to German policy."

That is the material aspect. He proceeds: "Altogether apart from that it would be a disgrace to us to make this bargain with Germany at the expense of France, a disgrace from which the good name of this country could never recover. The Chancellor also in effect asks us to bargain away whatever obligations or interests we have as regards the neutrality of Belgium. We could not entertain that bargain either." He then says in these circumstances that "we must preserve our full freedom to act as circumstances may seem to us to require." I think in the circumstances the House will appreciate, I trust it will admire, the self-restraint of my right hon. friend. He then said, "The one way of maintaining the good relations between England and Germany is that we should continue to work together to preserve the peace of Europe. . . . For that object His Majesty's Government will work with all sincerity and good will. . . . If the peace of Europe can be preserved and the present crisis safely passed, my own endeavour will be to promote some arrangement, to which Germany could be a party, by which she could be assured that no aggressive or hostile policy would be pursued against her or her allies by France, Russia and ourselves, jointly or separately. I have desired this and worked for it as far as I could through the last Balkan crisis"—no statement was ever more true—"and Germany having a corresponding object, our relations sensibly improved. The idea has hitherto been too Utopian to form the subject of definite proposals, but if this present crisis, so much more acute than any that Europe has gone through for generations, be safely passed, I am hopeful that the relief and reaction which will follow may make possible some more definite approachment between the Powers than has been possible hitherto."

That document, in my opinion, states clearly, in temperate and dignified language, the attitude of this country. Can anyone who reads it and who realises and appreciates the tone of obvious sincerity and earnestness which underlies it—can anyone honestly bring against the Government of this country the charge that in spite of great provocation—for I regard the proposals made to us as proposals we might have thrown aside without consideration and almost without answer—can anyone doubt that in spite of great provocation my right hon. friend—who had already earned the title—no one ever more deserved it—of the peace-maker of Europe, persisted to the very last moment of the last hour in that great and beneficent but unhappily frustrated purpose ?

I am entitled to say, and I do say on behalf of this country—I speak not for party, but for the country as a whole—we made every effort that a Government could possibly make for peace. This war has been forced upon us.

And what is it that we are fighting for ? No one knows better than the members of the Government the terrible and incalculable sufferings, economic, social, personal, political, which war, especially war between the Great Powers of the world, must entail. There is not a man among us sitting on this bench in these trying days—more trying, perhaps, than any body of statesmen for a hundred years has had to pass through—there is not a man among us who has not during the whole of that time had clearly before his vision the almost unequalled suffering which war, even in a just cause, must bring about, not only to us who are for the moment living in this country and in the other countries of the world, but to posterity and to the whole prospects of European civilisation. Every step we took, we took with that vision before our eyes, and with a sense of responsibility which it is impossible to describe. Unhappily in spite of all our efforts to keep the peace, and with that full and overpowering consciousness of the results of the issue if we decided in favour of war, nevertheless we have thought it to be our duty as well as the interest of this country to go to war. The House may be well assured it was because we believe, and I am certain the country will believe, we are unsheathing our swords in a just cause.

If I am asked what we are fighting for, I can reply in two sentences. In the first place, to fulfil a solemn international obligation—an obligation which, if it had been entered into between private persons in the ordinary concerns of life, would have been regarded as an obligation not only of law, but of honour, which no self-respecting man could possibly have repudiated.

I say, secondly, we are fighting to vindicate the principle in these days when material force sometimes seems to be the dominant influence and factor in the development of mankind, that small nationalities are not to be crushed, in defiance of international good faith, by the arbitrary will of a strong and overmastering Power. I do not believe any nation ever entered into a great controversy—and this is one of the greatest history will ever know—with a clearer conscience and stronger conviction that it is fighting, not for aggression, not for the maintenance even of its own selfish interest, but in defence of principles the maintenance of which is vital to the civilisation of the world, and with the full conviction, not only of the wisdom and justice, but of the obligations which lay upon us to challenge this great issue. If we are entering into the struggle, let us now make sure that all the resources, not only of this United Kingdom, but of the vast Empire of which it is the centre, shall be thrown into the scale, and it is that that object may be adequately secured that I am now about to make the very unusual demand upon the Committee to give the Government a Vote of Credit of £100,000,000. I am not going—and I am sure the Committee do not wish it—into the technical distinction between Votes of Credit and Supplementary Estimates. There is a much higher point of view than that. If it were necessary I could justify upon purely technical grounds the course we propose to adopt, but I am not going to do so because I think it would be foreign to the temper and disposition of the Committee.

There is one thing I do call attention to—that is the title and heading of the Bill. As a rule in the past Votes of this kind have been taken simply for naval and military operations, but we have thought it right to ask the Committee to give us its confidence in the extension of the traditional area of Votes of Credit, so that this money which we are asking them to allow us to expend may be applied not only for strictly naval and military operations but to assist the food supplies, promote the continuance of trade, industry, business and communications, whether by means of insurance, indemnity against risk or otherwise, for the relief of distress, and generally for all expenses arising out of the existence of a state of war. I believe the Committee will agree with us that it was wise to extend the area of the Vote of Credit so as to include all these serious matters. It gives the Government a free hand. Of course, the Treasury will account for it, and any expenditure that takes place will be subject to the approval of the House. I think it would be a great pity, in fact a great disaster, if in a crisis of this magnitude we were not enabled to make provision—provision far more needed now than it was under the simpler conditions that prevailed in the old days—for all the various ramifications and developments of expenditure which the existence of a state of war between the Great Powers of Europe must entail on any one of them.

I am asking also in my character of Secretary of State for War—a position which I held until this morning—for a Supplementary Estimate for men of the Army. Perhaps the Committee will allow me for a moment just to say on that personal matter that I took upon myself the office of Secretary of State for War under conditions upon which I need not go back, which are fresh in the minds of everyone,[1] in the hope and with the object that the conditions of things in the Army, which all of us deplored, might speedily be brought to an end, and complete confidence re-established. I believe that is the case, in fact I know it to be. There is no more loyal and united body, no body in which the spirit and habit of discipline are more deeply ingrained and cherished than in the British Army. Glad as I should have been to continue the work in that office, and would have done so under normal conditions, it wouldnot be fair to the Army, it would not be just to the country, that any Minister should divide his attention between that Department and another, still less than the First Minister of the Crown, who has to look into the affairs of all Departments, and is ultimately responsible for the whole policy of the Cabinet, should give, as he could only give, perfunctory attention to the affairs of our Army in a great war. I am very glad to say that a very distinguished soldier and administrator in the person of Lord Kitchener, with the great public spirit and patriotism that everyone would expect from him, stepped into the breach. Lord Kitchener, as everyone knows, is not a politician. His association with the Government as a member of the Cabinet for this purpose must not be taken as in any way identifying him with any set of political opinions. He has at a great emergency responded to a great public call, and I am certain he will have with him in the discharge of one of the most arduous tasks that has ever fallen upon a Minister the complete confidence of all parties and all opinions.

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[1] In consequence of the resignation of Colonel Seely in March, 1914.

I am asking on his behalf for the Army, power to increase the number of all men of all ranks, in addition to the number already voted, no fewer than 500,000. I am certain the Committee will not refuse its sanction, for we are encouraged to ask for it not only by our own sense of the gravity and the necessities of the case, but by the knowledge that India is prepared to send us certainly two Divisions, and that every one of our self-governing Dominions, spontaneously and unasked, has already tendered to the utmost limits of their possibilities, both in men and in money, every help they can afford to the Empire in a moment of need. Sir, the Mother Country must set the example, while she responds with gratitude and affection to those filial overtures from the outlying members of her family.

I will say no more. This is not an occasion for controversial discussion. In all that I have said, either in the statement of our case or in my general description of the provision we think it necessary to make, I believe I have not gone beyond the strict bounds of truth. It is not my purpose —it is not the purpose of any patriotic man—to inflame feeling, to indulge in rhetoric, to excite international animosities. The occasion is far too grave for that. We have a great duty to perform, we have a great trust to fulfil, and we confidently believe that Parliament and the country will enable us to do it.

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE CABINET AND THE WAR

The course of the War—First Battle of Ypres—Beginning of trench warfare—The entry of Turkey—The work of the Fleet—The Russian "steam-roller"—The standstill in the East—The Prime Minister's responsibility—And its limitations—Asquith and the soldiers—Mr. Lloyd George's criticisms and alternative strategy—The Cabinet and the conduct of the War—Many experiments—Committee of Imperial Defence and War Council—Some examples—Powers of the Cabinet in war—France and demands of the Allies—Questions of policy—The contention about contraband—The situation in December 1914—The burden on Lord Kitchener—His view of the Territorial Army—His great qualities and certain limitations. J. A. S.

THE military history of the Great War lies outside the scope of any biography. All that can be done in this book is to look at it through the eyes of the Cabinet, and to bring into relief certain events which specially concerned Asquith in the period from August 1914 to December 1916, when he ceased to be Prime Minister. Yet for this purpose it is necessary to keep in mind the main stream of events, which, familiar as it is, must be briefly recalled. 1914 Age 62

Before the end of the third week in August, the French offensive into Alsace-Lorraine had definitely failed, but persistence in it had seriously weakened the defence against the advance of the Germans through Belgium, which was now recognised as their main line of attack. Faced with superior numbers the Expeditionary Force which was moving on Mons by 22nd August, was compelled to fall back in the direction of Paris, and continued to retreat in conformity with its ally until 6th September, when the great counter-attack began, and the Germans were driven back across the Marne and took up their position on the Aisne. Fighting on the Aisne continued from the middle of September till the beginning of October, and the trench warfare which remained the chief feature of the war for nearly four years began to develop at this date. Up to the end of the battle of the Marne the British Force, 100,000 strong, had suffered 17,000 casualties, and drafts amounting to 20,000 had been sent up to the front to make good these losses. By the end of May 1915 our army in France had grown to 600,000 men.

At the beginning of October 1914, by arrangement with General

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Joffre, whose troops were gradually extending their left flank towards the north, the British troops began a northward movement so as to prolong the Allied line towards the sea and protect the Channel ports. But the Germans also extended their right flank in the same direction, with the result that when they reached their new ground, the British troops found themselves brought to a halt. About the same time the Germans attacked and took Antwerp in spite of the spirited dash to its rescue of a British contingent, accompanied by Mr. Churchill in person, which found itself helpless in default of French support. Though this effort failed in its immediate object, and even incurred some ridicule at the time, it afforded a useful breathing space to the main British force, which between 19th October and 22nd November had to bear the brunt of a violent and determined attack in the neighbourhood of Ypres (first battle of Ypres). This was repulsed after desperate fighting, and at the end of it the trench barrier between the fighting armies was consolidated from the Swiss frontier to the sea. The history of the War from that point might be summarised as that of efforts to break through, or outflank or wear down the entrenched opposition.

In the meantime Turkey had entered the War on the side of Germany, and measures had to be taken to secure Egypt against attack. The Territorial Division and Yeomanry regiments which had been sent there to replace Regular troops at the outbreak of the War were now reinforced with Indian troops which together with certain Australian and New Zealand contingents were halted at Port Said instead of being brought on to France. At the beginning of February in the following year the Turks delivered a half-hearted attack on the Suez Canal which was easily repulsed. The British Army was now being reinforced by the splendid effort of the Dominions which hailed the British cause as that of the whole British Commonwealth of Nations.

The command of the sea was the special charge of the British Navy, which in the early stages of the War had both to keep its watch in the North Sea and to clear the distant seas of German raiders. It began the War with a serious and costly mistake—the failure to intercept the German ships *Goeben* and *Breslau* on their way to Constantinople—but, in spite of some heavy losses, its main task was never in jeopardy, and the swoop of Beatty's Cruiser Squadron into the Bight of Heligoland at the end of August confirmed the Germans in their decision to keep their High Sea Fleet in port except for occasional raids by fast squadrons on the East Coast. Only one serious reverse there was before the end of the year, the destruction of Admiral Cradock's Cruiser Squadron in the Pacific by the heavier metal of Von Spee's armoured cruisers, the *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, but this was promptly avenged by the despatch of two battle-cruisers *Inflexible* and *Invincible* under Admiral Sturdee, who by skilful concerted action with another battle-cruiser, the *Australia*, which was already in Fiji, intercepted von Spee in the Falkland Islands and destroyed his squadron. The *Emden* had already been caught and destroyed, and by the end of the first week in December there was no German ship at large on any of the oceans. In the meantime the command of the sea placed all German Colonies in Africa, the Pacific, and the Far East at the mercy of Japan and the British Dominions, and most of them were captured before the year was out. General Botha, who ten years previously had been in the field against Great Britain, now led the expedition against German South-West Africa.

Before the end of the year the extravagant hopes that had been built on the Russian part in the War had been greatly dashed. Rennenkampf's initial success in East Prussia greatly helped to relieve the pressure on the Allies in the West, but it was quickly followed by the German victory of Tannenberg ; and though the Austrian offensive into Poland had been heavily defeated and the Russians at one moment threatened German territory, the Germans had driven them back to the Bzura-Ravka river line in front of Warsaw, and by the end of the year the opposing armies had fought themselves to a standstill in the East as in the West. Russia had inexhaustible supplies of men who fought with great gallantry, but being ill-equipped with munitions, and transport, she could not for more than brief periods play the part of "steam-roller" which her western Allies had expected of her.

II

Technically the British Prime Minister was responsible for everything, and was liable to be discredited by any reverse in any part of the field. Actually success or failure depended on the combined action of three great and several minor Governments operating over a vast field ; on the preparedness or unpreparedness of their War Departments, the skill or blundering of their Generals, the varying and often conflicting policies of their Foreign Offices, their resources in money and credit and innumerable other factors mounting up to a vast aggregate on which one Government and one statesman could have only a limited influence. Plans laid for the West might

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be utterly frustrated by the defeat of the Russians in the East; support promised for enterprises in distant theatres might be suddenly withdrawn to meet emergencies nearer home; an Ally might intervene to veto projects which were strategically desirable, but politically objectionable to itself, or to refuse concessions which might have won an ally or kept a possible enemy neutral. As it proceeded, the War more and more resembled a vast equation with innumerable unknown factors which could only be worked out by trial and error. Adversity alone taught—and possibly nothing else could have taught—the nations fighting together the need of concerting their action in such a way as to secure unity and prompt decision.

The conduct of such a war inevitably offered the broadest target for criticism. No one was on safer ground than the critic who preferred other plans to those actually adopted and when anything went wrong was sure that his alternative would have succeeded if it had been tried. Nimble-witted politicians accustomed to the quick movements and spirited diversions of their civilian campaigns complained bitterly of the lack of imagination and resourcefulnes in the military mind which could find no alternative to a war of attrition on the Western front; exasperation set in, when military experts vetoed promising-looking schemes for avoiding or evading this necessity on the ground that men could not be spared or transport provided, or that mountains and rivers which the amateur strategist had overlooked forbade their adoption. To measure these things aright we need to get back into the atmosphere of 1914. Except Kitchener, there were few men of authority in any country who, when the War broke out, believed that it could last more than six months, and after the battle of the Marne hopes had run high that a decisive Allied victory would follow in a short time. To see two immense and evenly balanced armies gradually settle down to a war of exhaustion; to watch the terrible roll of casualties mounting up with apparently no result; to see experiment after experiment fail, and those of which the most was expected leading to the worst catastrophes—all this was disillusion and disappointment bringing inevitably searching questions as to the conduct of the War and the competence of Government, Prime Minister, War Secretary and Commander-in-Chief.

Here was the seed of the quarrels between politicians and soldiers which have accompanied all wars, unless the soldier, like Napoleon, has combined the functions of both. Asquith was determined, so far as he could, to prevent this development within his Government.

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To support both the Commander-in-Chief in France and the great soldier whom he had appointed as War Secretary, to give them the utmost freedom of action, and to defend them against attacks, whether in Parliament or the Press, he considered to be the first of his duties as Prime Minister. When differences arose between the soldiers and the politicians, he would patiently hear both sides and do his utmost to compose them, but he would not play the part of amateur strategist or foist his opinions upon men who had made soldiering the study of their lives. All the principal military men who came into contact with him have borne witness to his coolness, his patience, his loyalty, his understanding of their difficulties. Kitchener's trust in Asquith and his belief that in Asquith he had found solid rock among shifting sands was the one thing which kept him going through the friction and vexation that attended his dealings with other politicians.

But this attitude of mind was by no means shared by some of Asquith's colleagues, and least of all by Mr. Lloyd George, whose impatience with military men and the military mind began to appear before the War was many weeks old. When three months after the battle of the Marne it was evident that no progress was being made, he broke out into complaints at what he supposed to be the results of military ineptitude. He saw no signs, he told the Prime Minister on the last day of the year, that "the military leaders and guides were considering any plan for extricating us from the present unsatisfactory position." Had he not been a witness of their deplorable lack of prevision he "would not have thought it possible that men so responsibly placed could have displayed so little foresight." The following day (1st Jan., 1915) he launched what Sir William Robertson calls his "famous memorandum" "proposing that the entire Expeditionary Force, with the exception of a general reserve to be kept temporarily near Boulogne, should be withdrawn from France and sent to the Balkans whence, in combination with the armies of Serbia, Greece and Rumania, our main military effort would be directed against Austria, instead of vainly continuing the attempts to break through the German defences on the Western front. Simultaneously with this transfer, a force of 100,000 British troops was to be landed in Syria so as to cut off the 80,000 Turkish troops reported to be moving thence on Egypt."[1] Mr. Churchill also, though less dissatisfied with the efforts of the British generals in France, was glowing with the possibilities of the amphibious warfare for which British power was specially

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[1] Sir William Robertson's *Soldiers and Statesmen*, I, p. 82.

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suited, and becoming more and more impatient at the narrow military vision which refused to consider them.[1]

In fact the search for plans which Mr. Lloyd George desired was going on feverishly in all the General Staffs on both sides, and British Generals with their relatively small force might reasonably have answered that they alone could not be expected to provide them. Their task for months to come was, in fact, to hold on at all costs against an enemy who occupied generally the more favourable position and might at any moment that he chose to call a halt in the East, come back to the West and renew his onslaught. Their only means of extricating themselves would have been to walk away (if that was possible) and let the enemy come on to the coasts and the Channel ports.

From this point we may trace the long contention between different temperaments and schools of thought which only ended, if indeed it ended then, with the end of the War. Asquith was wholly sceptical as to the value of either agitation or imprecation in winning the War, and he thought it of high importance that both the Government and the public should keep an equal mind in face of adversity. Mr. Lloyd George, in common with Lord Northcliffe, who took the same line in his many newspapers, believed in constantly whipping up both the Government and the public to effort and more effort, and imparting to others the sense of peril which they felt so acutely themselves. Asquith could only with extreme reluctance be induced to cross the boundary between the civilian and the military spheres: Mr. Lloyd George acknowledged no such boundary, and had profound misgivings about the competence of military men in their own sphere. Asquith had the patient temperament which could wait for concentration and slow results; Mr. Lloyd George looked at the whole wide field of war and saw in it endless opportunities for surprises and diversions of which skill and imagination would take advantage.

In the later stages of the War this was to develop into an incessant conflict, both open and veiled, between "Easterners" and "Westerners"; but in the early months the debate was mainly between the demand for quick returns and the inability of either the War Office or the fighting army to provide them. In this Asquith threw his shield over the soldiers, whenever he thought that they were being exposed to impatient and unjust criticism, and at the end of the year he was not at all disposed to pass any harsh judgment upon the conduct of the army which had contributed to the victory of the Marne, and stubbornly held its own against heavy odds in the desperate fighting at Ypres. During these months neither he nor the Cabinet, with the exception of Mr. Lloyd George, saw any possible alternative to the strategy of prolonging the Allied line to the sea for the protection of the Channel ports, and they wisely confined themselves to preparing the new armies and organising the country for war. Describing his own mood at this time, Asquith used to say that he was never an optimist about the immediate future, but always confident of the final result. When news was brought back to him that Sir John French was highly sanguine about his next move, he observed that it was an excellent thing to have an optimist at the front provided you had a pessimist in the rear. Lord Kitchener was often in these days the pessimist in the rear, but he played this part in a stately and massive manner, which chimed in with Asquith's mood, whereas Mr. Lloyd George's shriller note was often an irritant.

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[1] *World Crisis,* Vol. I, Chap. I.

III

Asquith himself has said that the root difficulty in the early conduct of the War was "how to combine rapid and effective action in the various theatres with the maintenance of Cabinet responsibilities and control." The problem could only be solved completely by deposing the Cabinet in favour of a small and select group of its own members, and even that was no cure for the differences of opinion which arose between members of this group or between them and the soldiers in the field. The case was even aggravated when the fining down process left a small number of able and strong-willed men of conflicting opinions to wage war with one another as to the manner in which the War should be conducted.

All sorts of experiments were made and they were called by various names, each of which was supposed to mark an advance on what had gone before, but all encountered the same difficulty and masked the same fact, which was the simple one that at each stage of the War there were great and legitimate differences of opinion among the highest authorities about the immensely difficult and complicated questions which arose on all hands. The idea vaguely held by the public before the War that on the outbreak of hostilities the civilian Government passed into the background and confined itself to raising money and sending supplies to soldiers who "conduct the war" never was true, and was least of all true in the circumstances of the Great War. From beginning to end, 1914 Age 62 civilian Ministers found themselves compelled to choose between rival and competing military plans, each of which had highly expert authority behind it, and to adjust whatever plan was chosen to the policy and strategy of Allies, which was often in conflict with what their own military advisers recommended and what they themselves would have preferred. In whatever way the Ministerial pack might be shuffled, it was not to be supposed that active and conscientious men who accepted responsibility for the results would remain mere spectators of the conflict, or refrain from expressing opinions which they held with conviction. Lord Kitchener is reported to have said after one of his differences with the Cabinet that it was "repugnant to him to have to reveal military secrets to twenty-three gentlemen with whom he was barely acquainted," but the twenty-three being charged with the ultimate responsibility could not reasonably be asked to accept the plea of military necessity as a ground for keeping them in ignorance of the facts.

During the first months of the War the method adopted was that of making the Prime Minister and the heads of the fighting departments responsible for the day-to-day operations, with the Committee of Imperial Defence or "War Council" at hand for "serious questions involving new departures in policy or joint strategic operations." This delegation of its powers undoubtedly required forbearance on the part of the Cabinet, but no serious complaint was heard that during these months the Cabinet obtruded itself unduly, or that any delay in operations or lack of promptitude in military decisions was due to its interventions. Asquith knew very well that if at this stage he had attempted to draw a hard-and-fast line between an inner and an outer Cabinet, or to assign to the one what the other might have considered a superior function, he would have brought upon himself unnecessary trouble and friction. He trusted to the good sense of his colleagues to accept decisions which were bound to be made in their absence, and he put no limit to the subjects which the full Cabinet might discuss. Thus he reports on 6th August,[1] the day after the big Council attended by all the experts :

> "We had our usual Cabinet this morning and decided with much less demur than I expected to sanction the dispatch of the Expeditionary Force of four divisions. We also discussed a number of smaller schemes for attacking German ports and wireless stations in East and West Africa and the China Seas. Indeed I had to remark that we looked more like a gang of Elizabethan buccaneers than a meek collection of black-coated Liberal Ministers."

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[1] *Memories and Reflections*, II, Chap. III.

The next records are of the same tenor :

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> Aug. 20. A rather long Cabinet this morning, all sorts of odds and ends about coal and contraband.
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> Aug. 21. We had a long Cabinet this morning, mostly about details connected with the War. The real centre of interest, political, not military, at the moment is Turkey, and the two darkest horses in the European stable, Italy and Rumania. The different points of view of different people are rather amusing, Kitchener strong that Rumania is the real pivot of the situation ; Masterman eagerly pro-Bulgarian, but very much against any aggressive action *vis-à-vis* Turkey which would excite our Mussulmans in India and Egypt ; Lloyd George keen for Balkan Confederation, Grey judicious and critical all round ; Haldane instructive ; and the " Beagles " and " Bobtails " silent and bewildered.

On 1st September, however, when a decision had to be taken immediately on Sir John French's telegrams announcing that he was about to retire behind the Seine, Asquith, as already recorded, is seen summoning the few colleagues within reach to a midnight conference at Downing Street, and coming immediately to the decision that Lord Kitchener should go himself to France and clear up the situation. Kitchener went out to France armed with " Cabinet instructions," but the Cabinet heard of his mission for the first time the next morning.

The process was the same with every military decision which had to be taken quickly :

> " Oct. 2. I was away, but Grey, Kitchener and Winston held a late meeting, and, I fancy, with Grey's rather reluctant consent, the intrepid Winston set off at midnight and ought to have reached Antwerp at about nine this morning."

Five days later when Mr. Churchill had come back, it was agreed, " after a conference with K. and Winston," that Antwerp should be evacuated. From now onwards to the days of the first Coalition, Asquith's Cabinet letters to the King show the same procedure. Ministers meet not every day, as has been supposed, but at intervals varying from a week to three days, though sometimes on two days in succession. Lord Kitchener gives them an account of operations on the various fronts which is discussed and sometimes with warmth, but, so far as the actual operations are concerned, almost invariably after and not before the event.

On 8th September Asquith reports that " the suggestion that we should send 20,000 or 30,000 troops to hold the road from Ostend to Antwerp was of course rejected by the Cabinet on military grounds,"[1] but this is the only record of the kind that can be found in the documents of this period. All communications from the Government to General Headquarters in France about actual military operations were left to Kitchener and Asquith, who consulted Mr. Churchill when the Navy was concerned, and I have been unable to discover any case during this first period in which it was even alleged that these operations were hampered by their slowness and indecision. For good or ill in these days events were proceeding "according to plan," and civilian Ministers were, with one or two exceptions, extremely reluctant to intervene.

IV

This method worked well enough so long as the original plans held, but when new situations arose, for which new plans had to be devised, its defects began to appear. The need now was for a permanent body charged with the central control and direction of the War, in regular touch with the Staffs in the Admiralty and the War Office as well as with the Foreign Office and other Departments. In the absence of such a body, there was no direct contact between the Chiefs of the Staffs and the Ministers supervising the War, and no authority specially charged with the duty of looking ahead and making plans to meet the probable emergencies. All these deficiencies were brought out in the haphazard improvisations that had to be made to prolong the defence of Antwerp, though its fall had for some time been a highly probably event.

Asquith therefore decided before November was out to set up a special Committee of the Cabinet for the conduct of the War. This consisted of the Secretaries of State for War, India and Foreign Affairs, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and the First Lord of the Admiralty. The Prime Minister was Chairman, and experts whose opinion was desired attended either permanently or on special occasions. Mr. Balfour was included from the first, and Lord Haldane and Sir Arthur Wilson were added in January. Up to that time the Committee of Imperial Defence had been summoned under the name of the "War Council" to consider the question of Home Defence and other special problems, but from now onwards both the name and the work were absorbed in the new body. That kept regular records of its proceedings, and its decisions were conveyed at once to the Departments and acted upon. Asquith had described its method in a passage in his *Memories and Reflections* :[1]

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[1] This decision was reversed a month later when the 3rd Cavalry Division and the 7th Division were landed at Zeebrugge (7th October). In the interval the Battle of the Marne had taken place and it seemed desirable to use available resources to follow up the Allies' success.

> The proceedings of the War Council were exactly similar to that which had prevailed at the Committee of Imperial Defence. When a conclusion was reached, it was formulated in writing, and read out either at once or at the end of the meeting by the chairman, as had always been the case at the Committee. The only change which I made was that, for greater certainty and great security, the conclusions were immediately after the meeting circulated in writing to the Departments concerned ; in cases of urgency, on the same day. There was never any excuse for want of precision or for delay.
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> As to the position of the experts, it was precisely the same as it had always been at the Committee of Imperial Defence. They were there—it was the reason for their being there—to give the lay members the benefit of their opinion and advice. During ten years' experience of the Committee of Defence I have never known them show the least reluctance to do so, invited or uninvited, and that was the view taken by all my ministerial colleagues on the War Council.
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> In regard to the Cabinet, it never abdicated its ultimate authority, though it, very properly as I think, was content normally to delegate the active conduct of the war to the Ministers concerned and the War Council. All important steps were reported to it, and there were times when it took an active part and asserted its overruling authority.

It may be said generally of the next eighteen months—and this is specially true of the first Coalition—that the abdication of the Cabinet did not go far enough. Too many subjects were discussed by too many people with results which troubled the peace of the Government even when they did not affect the conduct of the War.

V

A glance through the records contained in Asquith's letters to the King may help to show the part played by the Cabinet in the early stage, and incidentally to throw some light on the course of events during the first months of the War.

Broadly speaking the Cabinet kept under its own control all large decisions relating to the choice of objectives, all questions of finance, and the numerous domestic questions arising out of the raising of men and the provision of munitions and supplies. Quite early in the day it decided that its own numbers were too big for some of these, and appointed small committees to take charge of them. Even in these matters the line between military and domestic questions was often uncertain, and Ministers in charge of Departments

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[1] II, pp. 87–88.

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complained that Kitchener withheld from them information—especially in regard to man-power—which it was essential for them to have, if they were to comply with his demands. How many men was he proposing to put into the field at given dates, how many would he leave for essential industries, say over a period of six months or a year ? This was the secret which he most desired to keep locked in his own bosom, and it was only with great reluctance that he parted with it in driblets which Ministers concerned often thought inadequate, if not actually misleading. The politicians alleged that Kitchener was much more than their match in craft and subtlety on these occasions, and it would certainly be true to say that on some of them there was considerable difficulty in bringing his military mind in touch with their civilian minds. Asquith was indefatigable in composing these quarrels and most patient in explaining to Kitchener that the twenty-three were not, as he seemed to think, encroaching on his sphere or prying into his secrets from idle curiosity, but merely seeking the facts and figures which they were bound to have if they were to do their part.

Finance undoubtedly impinged upon military operations. The costs of the War rapidly soared beyond all expectation or experience, and quite early in the day some Ministers saw a limit beyond which it would be impossible to carry on the War without ruining the country, and were of opinion that military plans should be laid accordingly. The soldiers always had the best of this argument, for the simple reason that, ardently as they might desire to find them, they could discover no such plans short of surrender when the Chancellor of the Exchequer notified that the Treasury was empty. Military extravagance none the less seemed appalling to the civilian mind, and the soldiers were begged to remember that even British credit was not illimitable and inexhaustible. In the end the soldiers proved to have measured the capacity of the nation better than the civilians, though Asquith, who had the Treasury mind, was often in a state of despair at what seemed their reckless extravagance.

But occasionally the Cabinet was moved to remonstrance at the unceasing demands of the Allies for financial assistance. All were of opinion that England was so rich that she could afford anything and not feel it. The waverers asked for money as the condition of coming in ; the stricken as the condition of remaining in ; and even the great Allies were of opinion that the use of British credit would help to cement friendship and make a favourable impression on their peoples. At the beginning of December 1914 Asquith reported to the King :

> "The French Government also are applicants for pecuniary assistance. Owing to the vicious character of their recent finance and the distrust which is consequently felt by their investing classes, they wish to start the necessary borrowing operations by a loan here of some eight millions at 5 per cent which would be, in effect, guaranteed by the British Government. They appear to think that, if this were successfully floated, it would go some way to restore the confidence and open the pockets of their own people. It is a very singular request, coming as it does from one of the richest countries in the world, the amount suggested being little more than, if as much as, the cost of the war for a single week. The Cabinet thought it politic to assent, with the condition—which the French are willing to accept—that the eight millions should be spent here in the purchase of supplies from British manufacturers and merchants."

A fortnight later Russia was an applicant:

> "Russia wishes to raise 100 millions. The Cabinet agreed to offer 40 on condition that 25 per cent of gold be deposited here in respect of all money advanced except that spent in the United Kingdom. France is to be asked to guarantee a half and at the same time to be informed that we are spending more on the war than either Russia or herself, our monthly expenditure being now about 45 millions, whereas neither of the other two allies is estimated to be spending more than 40 millions."

Presumably the Russian application had come through France. But these were only the premonitory symptoms of a habit which was to become chronic and ingrained before the War ended.

While the Cabinet as a whole stood aside from the daily conduct of the War, it debated all the larger operations which lay ahead, all the diplomacy which affected neutrals or possible new allies, and the considerable range of questions which touched policy as well as strategy. "The Cabinet are of opinion," Asquith reported (20th October, 1914), "that we ought to take a vigorous offensive against Turkey and to make every effort to bring in Bulgaria, Greece, and above all Rumania. Henceforward Great Britain must finally abandon the formula of 'Ottoman Integrity,' whether in Europe or in Asia." The date seems worth marking as that of the formal and solemn burial of the policy of 1878.

It may be added here that the Cabinet considered the promise of Constantinople to Russia which became necessary early in 1915 to be such a departure in policy that the Conservative leaders ought to be taken into confidence and the situation explained to them. Mr. Balfour, Lord Lansdowne, Mr. Bonar Law, and several other Unionist leaders accordingly came to 10 Downing Street where they met Asquith, Lord Grey, and other Ministers; and after a full discussion it was agreed that the Government could do nothing else than what they proposed to do.

The Dardanelles Expedition needs separate treatment; but it may be said briefly that the records abundantly bear out Asquith's contention that at no stage was it delayed or impeded by indecision in the Cabinet. The battle for and against was fought out in the War Council, and Ministers in their plenary sessions appear to have deferred with, if anything, too little scrutiny to what seemed to be an overwhelming weight of expert opinion.

Apart from the Dardanelles, plans for action in the Balkans were always before the Cabinet, and on 20th January, 1915, Asquith reports that Mr. Lloyd George was "arguing strongly forthe despatch of a force to help Serbia." Another subject constantly discussed was the danger of invasion, upon which Mr. Churchill, speaking for the Admiralty, was generally reassuring and Lord Kitchener often dubious. On 22nd October, 1914 the former expressed a confident opinion that "any operation on more than an insignificant scale was doomed to disaster," and the latter persisted in his view that "in the event of a stalemate position in the two military fields the Germans might contemplate invasion with a large force—say of 150,000 or 200,000 men."

The negotiations for bringing Italy into the War were reported to the full Cabinet and discussed at every stage. For long the gap between what Italy demanded and what the Allies were willing to give seemed beyond bridging, Russia strongly objecting to the sacrifice of what she considered to be Slav interests in the Adriatic. All through March 1915 the negotiations dragged on, but at the beginning of April Asquith, who was conducting the Foreign Office in Sir Edward Grey's absence, succeeded in bringing all parties into line and was warmly congratulated by his colleagues on the skill and firmness with which he had handled this very delicate business.

The question of contraband, the question of laying mines in open seas, and most other questions that touched the rights of neutrals or raised issues of international law were copiously discussed in the full Cabinet and lively differences of opinion were expressed. On 12th and 13th October there were long discussions as to the expediency of further mining in the North Sea, Mr. Churchill and his naval advisers reporting themselves as unanimously opposed to Lord Kitchener's proposal that mines should be laid at the entrance to the Bight of Heligoland. On 10th February, 1915, the draft of a proclamation—in retaliation to the German threat of a submarine blockade of the United Kingdom—announcing the intention to seize and detain all ships and cargoes having actual or presumed destination, was discussed by the whole Cabinet, and the debate was renewed the following week, when Asquith reported: 1914 Age 62

> "Mr. Churchill and the majority of the Cabinet were strong for the seizure of all cargoes with presumed German destination. The Prime Minister, Sir Edward Grey, and Lord Crewe urged very strongly the importance of not alienating and embittering neutral and particularly American opinion; the proposed reprisals being obviously more injurious to neutral commerce and interests than the more or less illusory German threat."

The Order in Council issued in March this year and justified as a reply to the German submarine attack suggests that these Ministers were for the time being overruled, but they remained on guard against the use of this Order in such a way as unnecessarily to alienate neutral opinion. Whenever these debates were renewed, as they often were, Sir Edward Grey's view that the one cardinal mistake which Great Britain could make in the field of war or diplomacy would be to alienate the United States was strongly backed by Asquith, and in general prevailed, in spite of the incessant agitation by newspapers which knew nothing of the difficulties.

To the end of his life Asquith warmly defended his Liberal Cabinet against the charge of incompetence, dilatoriness, or factiousness in anything that touched the conduct of the War. At the time he was sometimes heard to express the wish that he had "more Greys and Crewes" and not quite so many "very clever men" among his colleagues; but he claimed for them collectively that in mobilising the country for war they did a work which was not surpassed by that of any of their successors, and did it in circumstances of overwhelming difficulty for which there was no guiding experience. He was at home with this Cabinet and they were at home with him. His habit of letting debate run on, summing up, reserving judgment, but between one meeting and another finding solutions which expressed their general sense, had carried him through innumerable difficulties, and they did not mistake the patient benevolence in which above all public men he excelled for dilatoriness or weakness.

VI

At the end of 1914 it could fairly be claimed that the British effort had far surpassed any like effort during the same space of time in the history of the country, and to that extent there was ground for satisfaction and even pride. But the experience had also revealed serious weaknesses in some of the methods adopted when

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war broke out. A large part of the scheme which Lord Haldane had so elaborately worked out during his years of office had either been superseded or slipped out of existence when the war came. In the endeavour to send the largest possible force to France in the shortest possible time, the General Staff, to which he attached supreme importance, lost much of its authority, since the members composing it had almost without exception taken up appointments in France. This threw an excessive burden on Lord Kitchener and was mainly responsible for the difficulty of which Asquith and his colleagues made frequent complaint, of obtaining the clear-cut military view, detached from all political considerations, which a civilian Cabinet needs in the conduct of war. That almost necessarily became blurred when a Secretary of State for War, responsible to and mingling with the Civilian Cabinet, was the principal, if not the sole means of communications with the army, and the judge of what should be communicated to the Cabinet. For the next year and more Lord Kitchener was practically doubling the parts of Secretary of State and Chief of the Staff.

In yet another respect Lord Kitchener had added to his burdens, and that was in his method of raising the new armies. His biographer relates that when he came into the War Office " the cry was wrung from him " that he found the country " without an army and without any preparation to equip one." In the absence of the men who had built up the Territorial Army, there was apparently no one to tell him what part the Territorial Army was intended to play, what provision had been made for its expansion and equipment, and how its cadres might have been used as the basis for the new effort. He called it a " Town-Clerk's Army," and Mr. Churchill has suggested that he was under the impression that it was on a par with the French " Territorials "—mainly men beyond military age or unfit for active service employed behind the lines—of whom he had formed a rather low opinion during his service in France at the time of the Franco-German War. Whatever the reason, he decided that the Territorials should be kept for home defence and subsidiary services abroad ; and in the first week of the war the County Associations with their Committees for recruiting supply and equipment—on which many of the most capable business men in the country were serving—were informed that their services would not be needed. Having thus cleared the ground, Lord Kitchener proceeded to raise an entirely new army, wholly under the control of the War Office, and dependent for its supplies and munitions on the machinery and plant provided for the pre-war regular army. This may have been justified by the immensely effective emotional appeal which went out for the new "Kitchener armies," but it entailed delays and imposed burdens on the War Office which the Territorial machinery had been expressly devised to avoid. One of Lord Haldane's leading ideas had been that the civilian aid which was later invoked should be immediately mobilised through the Territorial Associations on the outbreak of war.

If any criticism may be made of Asquith and his colleagues at this stage it is that in the stress of these days when far-reaching decisions had to be taken, they did not obtain sufficient consideration for their own military schemes. Kitchener's neglect of the Territorials was, in fact, a constant worry to Asquith, though he felt it impossible to override him in a matter so intimately affecting his authority and prestige as the raising of the new armies. In the result both War Office and War Secretary started with burdens on their shoulders which it was impossible for them to carry without help, and the process of disburdening them and delegating their functions was attended with friction and delay which might have been avoided if they had started from the beginning on the broader basis.

This is in no sense a reproach to Lord Kitchener. Coming new on the scene, after a long absence from this country, he could not be expected to enter at once into the minds of those who had prepared the British military machine in the previous years. The contribution that he brought was immense—his own great personal prestige, the extraordinary insight with which, almost alone among military men in any country, he measured the task ahead, his capacity for getting things done and breaking down opposition, his masterly use of the instrument of voluntary service. If Asquith judged that these great qualities outweighed their defects he was assuredly right. But Kitchener had all his life been a professional soldier among professionals, and in setting out to raise the vast new armies now required he was breaking new ground in which experience gained in the relatively small professional army could be only a partial guide.

CHAPTER XL

THE MUNITIONS QUESTION

The campaign of 1915—Some costly experiments—The main anxieties—The question of munitions—An initial miscalculation and its consequences—The necessary partnership and its difficulties—The War Office and civilian contracts—Mutual recriminations—Sir Stanley von Donop and the official point of view—Shrapnel or high explosive—Trade Union Rules—Asquith's effort—His contemporary notes—The Ministry of Munitions—Agitation at the Front—Lord French and munitions—His offensive against Asquith and Kitchener—Asquith's reply—Lord Kitchener's note. J. A. S.

1915 Age 62 THE year 1915 was a period of costly experiments on both sides in the hope of breaking down the trench barriers in the West—among them being the method of intense bombardment followed by curtain fire practised by the British at Neuve Chapelle and Festubert, and by both British and French in their subsequent offensives; the method of poison-gas first practised by the Germans near Ypres on 22nd April, and adopted afterwards by French and British as well as Germans. The deadlock in the West continued throughout the year in spite of all these efforts. In the meantime the British made the first attempt on any big scale to get round the trench barrier by their attack on the Dardanelles, which was equally fruitless of immediate results. Later in the year, the great German and Austrian successes on the Eastern front tempted Bulgaria to throw in her lot with the Central Powers, and paved the way to an attack on Serbia by all three, which temporarily conquered that country, and compelled the Serbian armies to retreat in winter through the Albanian mountains. At the end of the year it could be argued, and no doubt truly, that through the entry into the War of the new British armies the Allies had gained in strength, whereas their opponents had suffered by attrition, but there had been no successes visible to the eye which seemed commensurate with the cost and sacrifice, and the deadlock still continued.

The events of this year, so far as they concerned this country and Asquith's Government, must be seen against this background. There were two main anxieties from the beginning of the year onwards. The first was the supply of the almost unlimited quantity of munitions which the new forms of attack demanded; the second the preparation for, and conduct of, the Dardanelles Campaign, which was the chief British contribution to the problem of outflanking the enemy. The two things together brought about the downfall of the Liberal Government, and need the separate examination which will be given them in this and the following chapters.

Within a few weeks of the outbreak of war Kitchener was reporting to the Cabinet that his orders for the prompt supply of necessaries for the new recruits were being "persistently obstructed" in the War Office and calling for the dismissal of officials whose "obstinacy and incompetence" were said to be the cause of delay. The officials replied that they were doing their utmost to execute orders which were beyond their capacity and though some of them were sternly disciplined, the complaints continued. A little later Kitchener himself fell under the same criticism on the even more serious subject of the supply of shells and high explosive to the fighting army. The demand for these was now rising to heights undreamt of before the war. From all the armies in the field, from French, from Russians, even from Germans, as well as from British, the cry went up for shells and more shells to break down the trench barriers in front of them—shells which, if only their Governments would provide them, would win victory and save hundreds of thousands of lives. The Governments laboured and sweated, but their utmost efforts were unequal to the demand, and the men in the trenches commented heavily on the incompetence, negligence and guilt of civilian politicians who had not foreseen, and now failed to supply, their need.

In all the camps alike the root of the trouble lay in the miscalculation of the nature of the war. Until the autumn of 1914 the War Offices of Europe were dominated by the German idea of war—the idea, derived from the Bismarckian series of wars, of rapid and crushing blows bringing an early enforced peace—and only a few eccentrics like M. Emile Bloch had dreamt of the long-drawn out trench warfare which was to determine the kind and quantity of munitions needed in the Great War. The German Commander-in-Chief, von Moltke, believed that the issue would be decided in one great battle; the French were so much of the same opinion that they made provision only for repairing the guns they had, not for increasing their number; we supposed we had done enough when we provided our Expeditionary Force with munitions for four great battles each lasting two days. Until after the Battle of the Marne none of the belligerents had seriously considered what might happen, if the

1915 Age 62 opposing forces fought each other to a standstill. It was the standstill which found the nations unprepared, and which led them to the long series of hazardous, improvised, and immensely destructive and costly experiments which constituted the larger part of the Great War.

II

Nothing could have exceeded the zeal and energy with which Kitchener set himself to the work of enrolling recruits and providing officers, instructors, and camps for the immense numbers which volunteered for service in the first few weeks of the War, and in a short time he had achieved results which most other professional soldiers, including the German, had thought to be impossible. But the munitions problem which confronted him when the trench warfare set in was beyond the most heroic effort of one man or one department. The British War Office lacked the great arsenals which are the plant of conscript armies, and the deficiency could only be made good by establishing a partnership with the great industries which could rapidly convert their manufacturing plant to the uses of the Army. A partnership it had to be if it was to work rapidly and harmoniously, but this required a certain delegation of functions, if not a surrender of power and control by the Secretary of State for War, which was not congenial to Kitchener. He neither liked to delegate his authority nor to let civilians encroach upon what he considered to be the military domain. His previous campaigns had been one man jobs, and it was not always easy to persuade him that preparations for the Great War must be the work of many hands.

This caused friction which it required all Asquith's diplomacy to keep within bounds. On 12th October, 1914, he set up a Munitions Committee of the Cabinet, consisting of Lord Haldane, Mr. Lloyd George, Mr. McKenna, Mr. Winston Churchill, Mr. Runciman, and Lord Lucas, to co-operate with Lord Kitchener and the War Office. The Committee began by placing its orders with the Ordnance Factories and great Armament Firms (who were invited to expand and subcontract when their own buildings and plant were not equal to the demand), but a little later extended its dealings to individual firms. Early in 1915 the War Office had contracts with 2,500 firms which had not hitherto made munitions, and immense new contracts were placed with American firms and companies. There was no other way of meeting the demand, but there were great difficulties in adjusting the new-comers to the old establishments, and, though there was good-will on both sides, the

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civilian manufacturers and contractors found themselves in a new world with regulations and requirements which were outside their experience.

Each side had its case. Just as Kitchener had been quickest to see the scale on which man-power would need to be provided, so Mr. Lloyd George had been quickest to see the scale on which gun-power would need to be prepared, and the kind of organisation which would be required for its preparation. To bring in the manufacturers and set them to work at once with the fewest official restrictions was eminently right, but in their zeal, many of them promised a good deal more than they proved capable of performing and when they failed to deliver, left the War Office exposed to the charge of having betrayed the Army. To Kitchener, who always worked to a time-table, these delays were exasperating and inexplicable, and he set them down to civilian incompetence. The retort came that the War Office itself was the chief culprit. Its indiscriminate recruiting was said to have deprived the manufacturers of the men they most needed, and the pedantry and obstructiveness of its experts to have checked and discouraged their efforts. The storm raged specially about the head of the Master-General of the Ordnance, Sir Stanley von Donop, who was alleged by manufacturers and contractors to have refused their offers, missed chances of obtaining material, and generally to have displayed the worst attributes of officialdom.

Sir Stanley had answers to all these allegations and he stood his ground as the man whose duty it was to make sure that the material supplied to him was up to the requisite standard and would not, if it was high explosive, burst British guns and kill British soldiers instead of German. Mr. Lloyd George took the manufacturers' side, while Kitchener warmly defended Sir Stanley, and at a critical moment placed on record in a letter to Asquith his complete confidence and that of the Army Council in the M.G.O. and their appreciation of his services in securing "adequate safety" and preventing the use of material "too far below the accepted standards." No one doubted the supreme competence of Lord Moulton, whom the Government had appointed as head of a special Committee of experts to deal with high explosives, but he too was driven to the conclusion that to supply anything like the quantity needed new ingredients were necessary, and these did not at once win the approval of the War Office experts. The critics now spoke of a pedantic playing for safety and pointed to the mass of empty shell which were piling up, while the experts debated or were

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supposed to be debating, but, as Kitchener rather grimly reminded Asquith a few months later, both the Prime Minister and the War Secretary would have been hanged on the gallows of public opinion, if any such catastrophe had happened to the British as befell the French, who lost 800 guns and many lives and suffered a serious set-back to their plans through the use of defective shells.[1]

Above and beyond this was the constant doubt for which no one at home was to blame, about the kind of munitions the situation required. In the early months it was extremely difficult to ascertain from the artillerymen at the front whether they wanted shrapnel or high explosive, and the bias in favour of shrapnel with which British gunners started, was only very gradually broken down.[2] This may have been inevitable, but sudden and rapid changes from the one to the other were extremely disconcerting to manufacturers, and once more they complained that their time-tables were hopelessly disarranged by them. Finally there was the ever-present difficulty of Trade Union rules and regulations preventing the "dilution" of labour, and the general speeding up which the emergency required. The workers regarded these rules as the guarantee of their standard of life; and rumours that manufacturers were making huge profits which they were not sharing with their men made them the more reluctant to abandon their peace-time methods of working except under proof of the sternest necessity.

III

Asquith did not pretend to judge the technical merits of these disputes, but he saw that any kind of friction meant delay and he laboured incessantly to keep contention within bounds and to reconcile Kitchener to the criticisms and warnings of the Munitions Committee. Whatever could be done by suasion, admonition, and unceasing efforts to compose quarrels he did, and with a complete impartiality which left him without the gratitude of any of the parties.

The Aides Memoires of the *Memories and Reflections*[3] contain some picturesque impressions of these times:

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[1] *Life of Lord Kitchener*, by Sir George Arthur, III, pp. 279–280. This observation was prompted by Sir Stanley von Donop's refusal to adopt a French proposal that we should alter the pattern of our H.E. shells.

[2] See on this subject, *Life of Lord Kitchener*, III, pp. 273–281. Lord Oxford's speech in the Connaught Rooms, 2nd June, 1919, and Appendix to this chapter. The bias in favour of shrapnel was founded on trials with field guns in 1903–1904. The General Staff then decided not to have H.E. for Horse or Field Artillery *guns*, although H.E. was still provided for Field Howitzers.

[3] II, p. 70.

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March 29. . . . Finally I had an extraordinary and really very interesting talk with L.G. We first tried to get at a working arrangement with Kitchener about the Munitions Committee, and I think we hit upon something that ought to do. Then before he left I said I thought it right to tell him that only to-day I had heard the sinister and, as I believed, absurd interpretations which were given to the articles in *The Times*, *Observer*, and *Morning Post*. I have never seen him more moved. He vehemently disclaimed having anything to do with the affair. Kitchener, he said, is the real culprit because in spite of every warning he has neglected up to the eleventh hour the proper provision of munitions, and K. being a Tory, or supposed to be one, the Tory press, afraid to attack him, are making me the target of their criticism.

As for himself (L.G.) he declared that he owed everything to me, that I had stuck to him and protected him and defended him when every man's hand was against him, and that he would (1) rather break stones, (2) dig potatoes, (3) be hung and quartered (these were metaphors he used at different stages of his broken but impassioned harangue) than do an act or say a word or harbour a thought that was disloyal to me, and he said that every one of his colleagues felt the same. His eyes were wet with tears, and I am sure that, with all his Celtic capacity for impulsive and momentary fervour, he was quite sincere. Of course I assured him that I had never for a moment doubted him, which is quite true, and he warmly wrung my hand and abruptly left the room.

March 31. The most serious thing I have done to-day is to try to compose the Kitchener and Lloyd George dispute about the new Committee. I think I shall probably succeed, particularly as L.G. is now off thinking of anything but drink and K. is occupied with shells. No sooner had I settled a row between L.G. and McKenna and all but settled the earlier row between Lloyd George and K. than this versatile and volatile personage goes off at a tangent on the question of drink. His mind apparently oscillates from hour to hour between the two poles of absurdity, cutting off all drink from the working man—which would lead to something like a universal strike—or buying out the whole liquor trade of the country and replacing it by a huge State monopoly.

April 16. I have been through rather a stormy experience. K., who is evidently a good deal perturbed, has been attacking L.G. for having disclosed to the Munitions Committee the figures which he, K., had confidentially communicated to the Cabinet. He declares that he can be no longer responsible for the War Office under such conditions. L.G. and Winston are both (the former having quite a presentable case) aggressive, and the situation is for the moment all the worse, particularly as Grey, a good deal to L.G.'s chagrin, strongly champions Kitchener. All this has come literally like a bolt out of the blue. I had not the faintest premonition of it. However, by dint of appeals and warnings and gives and takes and all sorts of devices and expedients I have succeeded in getting us back into more or less smooth water. Still, it leaves a disagreeable taste in one's mouth, particularly as L.G. let slip in the course of the altercations some injurious and wounding innuendoes which K. will be more than human to forget.

Later. I have been talking it over with Crewe, whose judgment I rate

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highest of any of my colleagues. Not for years—and he agrees with me—have I been more disillusioned from the personal point of view and depressed. The man who comes out of it best is Kitchener, clumsy in expression as he often is. As Crewe says, he is one who has been all his life accustomed either to take or to give orders, and he therefore finds it difficult to accommodate himself to the give and take of Cabinet discussion and comradeship. He was really moved to-day, though I am sure he would not have persisted in his resignation, and showed in the end a largeness of mind and temper which I greatly admired. I hate this side of politics, for it compels one to revise for the worse one's estimate of men whom one likes.

At the beginning of April 1915 Asquith had changed the Cabinet Committee appointed in the previous October into a special Munitions Committee presided over by Mr. Lloyd George, and a few weeks later this Committee was expanded into the Munitions Department with Mr. Lloyd George as Minister of Munitions in command of all the productive resources of the country for the manufacture and supply of munitions. It was entirely to Mr. Lloyd George's credit that he gave up the second place in the Government to undertake a difficult and thankless office which, though supremely important at the moment, was of inferior rank. Asquith has placed it on record[1] that Kitchener "completely approved" of the creation of this Ministry, and he himself, his biographer tells us, testified that he could "recall no single instance of friction with it." That Ministry justly won high panegyrics during the next three years, but it is due to its predecessors and to the War Office to bear in mind the immensity of the effort which, in spite of friction and inherent difficulties, had been made before it came on the scene. By the middle of April 1915, as Mr. Lloyd George told the House of Commons,[2] the output of munitions had been multiplied nineteen-fold, and the supplies for which provision had been made lasted the armies until April 1916, when the first supplies provided by the Ministry began to come in. The Ministry was untiring in its efforts, but it had the advantage both of larger powers and of much experience which had been dearly bought in the early days, as well as a more amenable spirit on the part of the workers whom Mr. Lloyd George knew better how to handle than the military authorities. It gives the measure of the effort required both earlier and later that in the few days' fighting in and about Neuve Chapelle in the spring of 1915, nearly as much artillery ammunition was expended by the British army as during the whole of the two and three-quarter years of the Boer War.

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[1] *Memories and Reflections*, II, p. 78.

[2] 21st April, 1915.

IV

The scene must now be shifted from Whitehall to the fighting front. In the early months of 1915 both General Joffre and Sir John French were convinced that by a policy of spirited attacks they could break through and roll up the German line on the Western front. Sir John started on 10th March at Neuve Chapelle and captured the village and 2,000 yards of German trenches at the cost of heavy casualties and an expenditure of munitions far exceeding all calculations. Undeterred by this, he attacked again on 17th April, and occupied Hill 60 on the southern side of the Ypres salient, but was obliged to report four days later that it had been retaken by the Germans. But his spirit was unquenchable, and on 2nd May he wrote to Kitchener that he was making all arrangements for the "big operation," i.e. a concerted attack with the French arranged earlier in the year, and said "the ammunition will be all right."[1] It was not all right, however, and when he had made this attack at Festubert, and largely failed, he opened an offensive against Asquith and Kitchener, deputing two members of his Staff to go to London and inform certain newspapers, Cabinet Ministers, and Leaders of Opposition of the grievous plight to which the army was reduced by the failure of the Government to provide it with munitions. It does not seem to have occurred to Sir John that the Government or Lord Kitchener would have advised him to defer his attacks, if he had not said that the "ammunition would be all right," or said, as he said now, that it was all wrong. 1915 Age 62

If the archives of other countries were searched, they would, no doubt, reveal many similar examples of recrimination between soldiers and Governments, but whereas, in other countries a stricter censorship or a keener sense of military discipline forbade reference to them in public, in England they became the subject of angry and bitter controversy in which newspapers and rival politicians quickly took a hand. Heart-breaking pictures were painted of gallant men in the field exposed at one moment to crushing bombardments without the power of replying, and at another ruthlessly sacrificed in attacks which for lack of munitions could not be pressed home—all this while lethargic Ministers sat in Whitehall "waiting and seeing" and even obstructing those of their own number who saw the truth, and were pressing for action. The brunt of these attacks fell at first on Lord Kitchener, but he had the

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[1] *Life of Lord Kitchener*, III, p. 236.

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satisfaction of seeing the public rally to his side, and the newspapers which led the attack publicly burnt on the Stock Exchange. But there was no doubt that the public was alarmed and disturbed, and many who exonerated Kitchener blamed the Government and the Prime Minister for deficiencies which they attributed to civilian ignorance and apathy.

The part which Sir John French played in this affair was only a surmise at the time, and Asquith wisely let it go unheeded. It was in any case foreign to his nature to believe that a man who was writing to him in affectionate and almost fulsome terms[1] could at the very time be engaged behind his back in an effort to discredit him and undermine his authority. But when at the end of the War Lord Ypres in his book " 1914 " (published in the year 1919) avowed that he had prompted this campaign and claimed that by so doing he had played a leading part in the substitution of the Coalition Government for the previous Liberal Government, Asquith for once was roused, and in a speech on 2nd June, 1919, he took off the gloves and delivered a slashing reply on all the points. This speech is printed in an appendix to this chapter and may be left to speak for itself. In all his life no charge ever wounded Asquith more deeply than the suggestion that he had suppressed or misrepresented the facts in his Newcastle speech—a speech specially designed to spur munition workers to greater activity—and now that all reasons for silence were passed, he saw no reason why he should submit to it. The Newcastle speech, if anyone cares to look it up, will surely seem in a masterly way to have struck the right line between the necessity of not encouraging the enemy by painting the situation too black, and the urgent need of spurring the home front to action by timely admonitions.

Asquith spent some days in preparing his reply, and though his own memory was quite clear that Lord Kitchener had, after talking with Lord French, authorised him to say what he did at Newcastle, it was only at the last moment, and almost by accident, that he was able to lay hands on the actual letter in Kitchener's own handwriting containing this authorisation. Though he never doubted that his word would be believed, it was a great relief to him to be able to fortify it with this irresistible documentary evidence.

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[1] From Lord French. Letter of 17th May, 1915 : " You have shown me so much true generous kindness throughout this trying campaign that I venture at this critical juncture to convey to you what is in my inmost thoughts. I am sure in the whole history of the War no General in the field has ever been helped in a difficult task by the head of his Government as I have been supported and strengthened by your unfailing sympathy and encouragement."

A note which Lord Kitchener caused to be circulated soon after the formation of the Coalition Government may find a place in this record: 1915 Age 62

"Hitherto Lord Kitchener, against his own judgment, has yielded to the pressing importunities of Sir John French, and has consented to send out infantry (notwithstanding that it could only be done by dislocating the arrangements for Home Defence) before the supply of artillery ammunition had reached the proper scale, and as a result he has had to endure a very heavy Press attack, which, if it did not emanate, has, at any rate, been immensely supported from the Army in France. If the Government have made a mistake, it has been in Lord Kitchener's opinion, not so much in their failure to produce ammunitions in greater quantities, as giving in to persuasions to send out more troops. Lord Kitchener feels that it would be a grave mistake for the Government to repeat this and does not wish to send out reinforcements until the supply of artillery ammunition has reached the standard of 17 rounds per day for the existing Force, and has also expanded sufficiently to enable the same proportion of ammunition to be supplied to the new troops as they go out."

APPENDIX

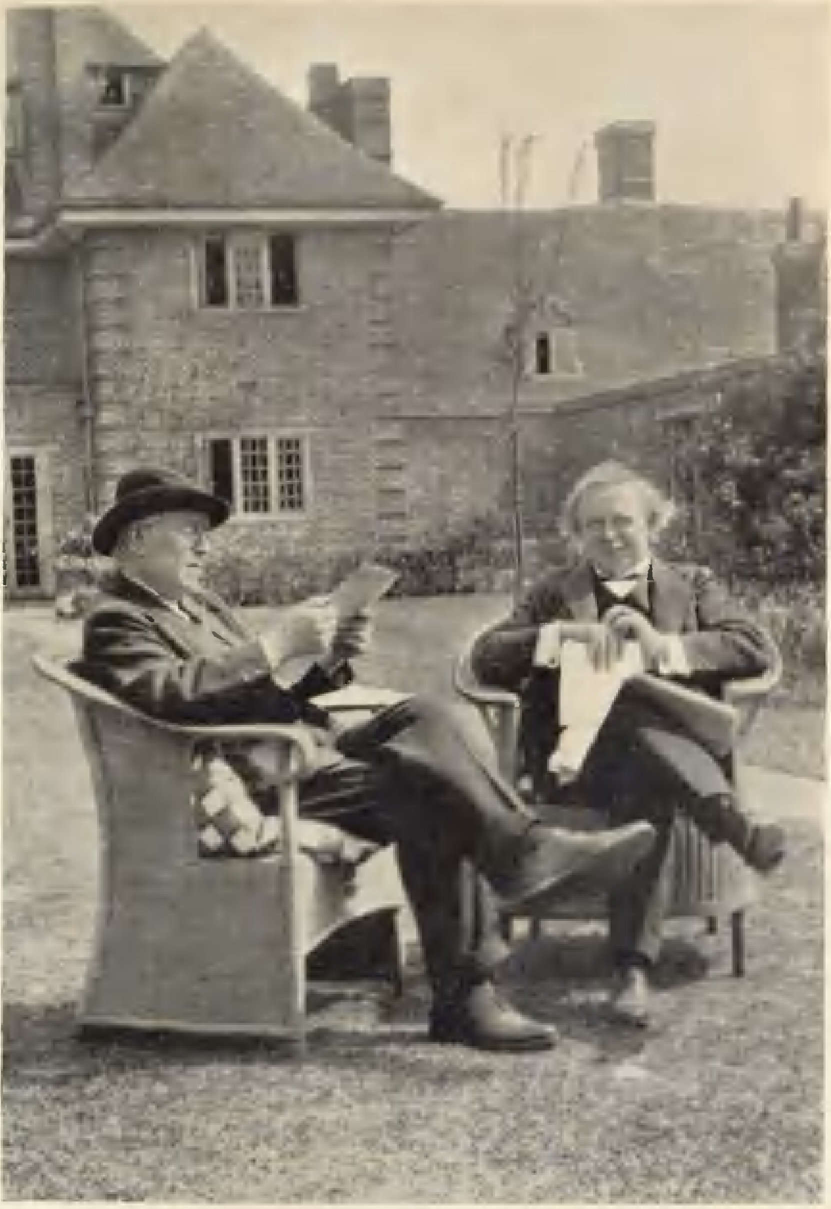
Speech in Connaught Rooms, 2nd June, 1919.

" What is the charge made by Lord French in this matter of munitions? He tells us his object was to make known some of the efforts he made to awaken both the Government and the public from that 'apathy which means certain defeat'; these efforts, he states, were continued for months, but his appeals fell upon deaf ears; and finally, after reading my speech at Newcastle (I will come to that presently), he lost all hope, and determined, at the risk of his own military future, by the aid of the Press and behind the back and without the knowledge of his own official chief, to destroy the apathy of the Government, and incidentally the Government itself, which, he says, had brought the Empire to 'the brink of disaster.' That is his case summarily put. As you see, it amounts to an allegation that, in spite of his warnings, the Government as a whole, and Lord Kitchener in particular, were criminally supine and negligent in a matter of capital importance for the conduct of the War.

Let me for a moment ask you, for they are all public property, to recall the actual facts. Nobody questions that the Expeditionary Force which we sent to France in August was fully equipped in all respects. Its artillery equipment was in excess of that which had been settled to be necessary in case of war. The losses which had to be made good after the retreat from Mons in the first autumn, and the rapid and enormous increase through recruiting of the New Army in the forces in the field, very soon began to put a strain, and a severe strain, on our machinery of production. From almost the first moment the matter engaged, and never ceased to engage for one day, the close and continuous attention of the Government. Lord Kitchener was assisted by a Committee of the Cabinet, and later on in the spring of 1915 I appointed a Special Munitions Committee of the Cabinet, independent of the War Office, and presided over by Mr. Lloyd George.

A speech made the day after my famous speech, or infamous speech, at Newcastle—made by Mr. Lloyd George in the House of Commons on 21st April, to which it is curious Lord French makes no reference, although I see he has dedicated his book to Mr. Lloyd George—surely he might have paid him the compliment of reading his speeches—this speech made on April 21st, the day after mine, was an expansion, but in entire harmony with what I said.

Mr. Lloyd George described with perfect accuracy exactly what had been done by this 'lethargic,' 'apathetic,' 'negligent' Government. He pointed out that the area of the supply of production had been



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enormously extended by from 2,500 to 3,000 new firms, by which I mean firms not previously so employed, who were brought into this particular industry; that immense orders had been placed both in America and Canada; that legislation had been passed to enable the War Office and the Admiralty to take over engineering works; with the result that while the armies in the field between September and March had been multiplied by something, I suppose, between four and five-fold in number, the output of munitions in the same time had been multiplied, not four or five, but nineteen-fold. In the month of May 1916, we were producing in three days the amount of ammunition usually produced before in a whole year. That is not a bad record.

The field guns of our army when war began were equipped, not with high explosives, but with shrapnel. That was a decision deliberately arrived at after a full inquiry by our best experts, and no doubt largely as a result of our experience in the South African War. Lord French says that he was always an advocate of high explosives for our field guns, but that his demands were rejected. I have seen no more surprising statement. He was Chief of the Imperial General Staff. He was chief military adviser to the Government for years before the War, and this is the first time that I or anyone whom I have been able to consult has ever heard of such a demand. There is no trace of it in official records. No one knows better than Lord French that in his position—for, as I have said, he was the most trusted expert adviser of the War Office and of the Government in all military matters—if he attached serious importance to this proposal, and if it had been in fact what is vulgarly called 'turned down' by the War Office, he could have brought it, as he constantly did bring these things, before the Committee of Imperial Defence, where it would have received the most attentive and respectful consideration. I can answer for it that no such thing was ever done.

I do not want to occupy your time unduly, but I must say a little more about this question of high explosives. I have told you that our field guns were equipped with shrapnel, and not with high explosives. I am now going to read a short passage from a report which was made by Lord Kitchener immediately after the formation of the Coalition Government in June 1915. It throws a light upon the history of this particular matter. Lord Kitchener says that early in September (1914)—that is to say, the month after the War began, the War Office took up the question of the design of shells of this nature (high explosives).

In October, General Deville, the most distinguished French artillerist then living, and head of the French Ordnance, at our invitation, in this month of October 1914, came over to discuss, amongst other things, this very matter,[1] and the subject of high explosive shells for field guns, as well as the fuse to be employed, the pattern of the shell, and the nature of the filling, was discussed between us. General Headquarters in France were consulted, and replies were received indicating that opinions were divided out there. But they considered it desirable that some high explosives should be provided if this could be done without interfering with the supply of shrapnel. On October 19th the first thousand rounds of 18-pounder high explosive shells was sent to France for trial and report. This was in the first two months of the War, and steps were taken to proceed with further manufacture. On November 6, a favourable report was received on the shells, and we were asked by General Headquarters to supply in future, as soon as we could procure it, 50 per cent of shrapnel and 50 per cent of high explosives. A week later a telegram was received asking that the percentage of high explosives should not be 50 per cent, but 25 per cent. I earnestly hope this document will become a Parliamentary paper.

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[1] On this point Asquith seems to have been misinformed. General Deville addressed himself not to the use of high explosive, but to the method of its manufacture and the design of the shell. The question of its use was raised by Sir Stanley von Donop himself, when he visited G.H.Q. in France in August 1914.

I want to read to you what follows, at the risk of becoming rather technical, because I want to show the country the great troubles with which we were concerned and our attempts to deal with them:

'At this stage,' says Lord Kitchener, 'we had to consider whether machinery employed in producing 18-pounder shrapnel, which was so urgently required, should be stopped and turned on instead to high explosive shell. The adoption of this course would not have produced any high explosive shell for 10 weeks or more, and during this period the provision of the absolutely necessary amount of ammunition for the field guns would have been seriously imperilled just when Sir John French was pressing for every round. Our expenditure of 18-pounder ammunition up to November 1st was 385,000 rounds, while our supply from manufacture was at that date approximately 45,000 a month. The stoppage of the supply of shrapnel would, in my opinion, have seriously affected the safety of the troops in the field, for we should thus have placed a large proportion of our machinery out of work at the most critical period of the War in order later to have an article which, no doubt, would have been somewhat better for certain purposes than the shrapnel shells then being provided. Additional instead of substituted orders were therefore at once placed, not only with the experienced armament firms but also with additional firms not previously engaged in this nature of manufacture, as well as in Canada and America.'

I think that is a conclusive vindication of the action which Lord Kitchener took up to that point. But we were not content with that. As Mr. Lloyd George pointed out in the speech which he made on April 21st, and as Lord Kitchener emphasises in this document, we had the advantage of having in this country in a high official position a man of the greatest scientific eminence—Lord Moulton, and he very patriotically took up this subject of the manufacture and development of high explosives, and as Lord Kitchener says, writing in June 1915:

'Lord Moulton has not only provided explosives for our needs and prepared for the large additional requirements we shall have to meet later when our ammunition grows to larger proportions, but he has enabled us to give all the Allies at various times, and notably France, sufficient explosives to enable them to continue the war.'

Lord French has referred to his letter of December 31, 1914, in which he set out his requirements, and as an illustration of what he calls the 'deplorable apathy' of the Home authorities he gives a wholly misleading account of the answer which was sent him from the War Office on

January 19th. Therefore I must in justice to the War Office and to Lord Kitchener, do what Lord French has not done—cite textually the answer of the War Office. The suggestion is that all this time we were living in a sort of fool's paradise, stopping our ears, shutting our eyes, not listening to Lord French's appeals, doing nothing to provide our Army with needed ammunition. This is the War Office letter:

'I am commanded to inform you that the Army Council are fully alive to the urgent importance of increasing the supply of gun ammunition for the Expeditionary Force, and have spared, and will spare, no effort to secure this end. In this connection the Council desire me to mention the serious labour questions to which the enhanced rates of output of all war materials have already given rise. It is hoped, for instance, that during the month of March as many rounds of 18-pounder ammunition will be produced in one week as would have been manufactured in 18 months in time of peace. This will entail very considerable development of our labour resources. . . . The Council desire to emphasise the fact that the orders for manufacture are not being limited by what they think it necessary to supply, but are entirely conditioned by the highest possible output of the ordnance factories throughout the Empire and the trade of England and the Allies and neutral countries of the world.'

Do not let it be supposed that the Government at this time and in the succeeding months were satisfied, or anything but disquieted, by the munitions situation. The contractors had promised more than they could perform; they were terribly behind in their deliveries, particularly in the matter of high explosives. I will give you one figure to show you how serious these failures were. The Army ought to have received, according to contracts, by May 15th, 481,000 high explosive 18-pounder shells; instead of which only 52,000, very little more than one-tenth of the whole, were delivered. On the other hand, the increase of the forces in the field, and the changed character of the fighting, led to an expenditure of artillery ammunition far in excess of the calculations of any expert authority in any of the belligerent forces.

In the fighting in and about Neuve Chapelle in the early spring of 1915, as Mr. Lloyd George pointed out in his speech, nearly as much artillery ammunition was spent by our Army as during the whole of the 2¾ years of the Boer War. How had they got such an enormous supply? Entirely through the efforts which the Government had made in the preceding weeks and months. So far from being inattentive and careless we were straining every nerve and resorting to every expedient to fill the gap.

Here let me pause and digress from the main stream of my argument. It is high time it was dealt with—the legend long current in a certain section of the Press, to which Lord French seeks to give the weight of his authority—I will show you before I sit down what that is worth—the legend of an apathetic Government with a lethargic head. I am represented in this pictorial and romantic travesty of history as spending my time lolling in an arm-chair, occasionally arbitrating over disputes of different Departments, waiting on the chapter of accidents, in the hope that somehow or other, and sometime or other, the storm-tossed ship might drift safely into port. That is the picture which I believe finds credence and acceptance among large numbers of the more backward parts of our population.

What is the fact ? I do not like, as you know, to speak very much about myself, but I am bound to do so. It is no exaggeration to say that, particularly in these early months of the War—in the critical and decisive months of the War—everything depended on what was done or what was left undone—it is no exaggeration to say that I was called upon almost every hour of every day to take on my own responsibility and initiative decisions which might be, and often were, of the most momentous consequence. I had to deal, not only with military and naval operations, the recruiting of the New Army, transport, food supply, and Labour problems, but also with inter-Allied finance, and what at that time was a task of supreme difficulty and delicacy, Allied diplomacy. I had the devoted help of most loyal and efficient colleagues, some of whom I am glad to see sitting around me at this table. There is not one of them who did not habitually come to me to get the last word—sometimes even the first word—in cases of difficulty and doubt.

And in the meantime what had this supine Government of sluggards and paralytics been doing ? They had, in time of peace, prepared for any war on any scale that British statesmanship had ever contemplated. We were, and we remained throughout the War, perfectly secure, not only in these Islands, but throughout our world-wide Empire, against risk of invasion. No foreign soldier ever set his foot on one square yard of British ground. Our Expeditionary Force was ready to start fully equipped and with the necessary transport, at a moment's notice, as it did, to wherever it was most required.

It soon became apparent that this war was going to dwarf all previous experience. What did we do ? We recruited, raised, equipped, and dispatched vast new armies, and we transported to the field of action the splendid contingents sent to our aid from all parts of the Empire all over the world. We cleared the seas of every German cruiser and merchantman. We carried through the long and delicate negotiations which secured for the Allies the co-operation and the active support of gallant Italy. These were some of the things—it is not an exhaustive catalogue—which were actually done in the course of six months, and I say again, the record is not one of lethargy or apathy.

But to come back to Lord French. I can only say for myself that, with all my other preoccupations, manifold and distracting as they were, this matter of the supply of munitions was rarely out of my thoughts. I used to see Lord Kitchener daily, often two or three times a day, and I believe hardly a day passed that I did not press him—not that he needed any pressure—to hurry on and increase production by every possible means. So dissatisfied and apprehensive did I become at the relatively slow rate of progress, as compared with our expectations and hopes, that I resolved to make a direct personal appeal both to masters and to men. That was the object and the motive of my visit to Newcastle.

But, observe, it was a very difficult business. I had to think, not only of our own people, but of our Allies, and still more of the enemy. Operations of great possible moment, as I knew, although I could not disclose it, were then impending, and it was of the utmost importance not to expose our weaknesses or to give encouragement to the Germans to think that we could not hold our own or more than our own. *I determined, therefore, to make sure of my ground, and instructed Lord Kitchener to send for Sir John French, to have him over here, and to get from him a concise report and survey of the then military situation, and to make his report to me before I spoke.* Sir John French came over. He was seen by Lord Kitchener at the War Office, and they discussed the matter. I have here, it is an interesting historical document—at least it may become so—the letter in Lord Kitchener's own handwriting which he wrote to me immediately after the interview with Sir John French. It is as follows:

> '*My dear Prime Minister,*
>
> *I have had a talk with French. He told me I could let you know that, with the present supply of ammunition, he will have as much as his troops will be able to use in the next forward movement.*'

That is dated 14th April, just a few days before I went to Newcastle. I will read it again.

'I have had a talk with French. He told me I could let you know'—(That is what I wanted. I am blamed for relying on his word. I believed in making assurance doubly sure.)—'with the present supply of ammunition'—(that is the ammunition we had been accumulating)—'he will have as much as his troops will be able to use in the next forward movement.'

What more is there to be said about that? I will say this—that Lord Kitchener, in a subsequent communication before I went to Newcastle, confirmed what is to be found in that letter. I therefore felt, because here I had got what I wanted, that I should be able to speak without giving encouragement to the enemy with regard to these delicate and dangerous operations which I knew were about to be launched. I felt not only entitled, but bound, at Newcastle to say what I did on that point. I quote my exact words. Lord French says he read my speech; I wonder if he did. If he had read it with anything like decent care, he could not have given a most misleading travesty of what I said. I said: 'I saw a statement the other day that the operations, not only of our own Army, but of our Allies, were being crippled, or at any rate hampered, by our failure to provide the necessary ammunition. There is no truth in that statement.'

Was I not justified in making that statement? Then I went on—I am still quoting from my Newcastle speech; then I went on to my main theme of the extreme and perilous urgency of the situation as regarded the future. That is the point I was on, and I may point out in passing that the very next night, in his speech in the House of Commons, Mr. Lloyd George said exactly the same thing—namely, that up to that moment, the moment at which he and I were speaking, the real point of danger and difficulty was the future. It was a long speech. I summed up the case in these words: 'There is not a single naval or military authority among us, who, in view of the proximate and prospective requirements' (observe these words), 'does not declare that a large and rapid increase in the output of munitions has become one of the first necessities of the State. Lord Kitchener says so, Lord Fisher (who was then First Sea Lord) I know would say so, and Sir John French has said so. This, then, is what in the name of your King and Country we ask you to do—to " deliver the goods." '

That is the speech, the reading of which—for he says he did read it—caused Lord French to lose all hope of receiving help from the Government as then constituted, and set to work behind the back of his official chief to secure, in concert with outsiders, the overthrow of the Government.

There was a time in the decadent days of the Roman Empire when the Praetorians, as they were called, and sometimes the armies of distant parts of the Empire, used to change Emperors. I confess I never knew, until I read Lord French's article, that it was to him, the Commander-in-Chief of our Armies in France, that we owed the blessings of a Coalition Government. But he says so, and to bring about this beneficent revolution in the conduct of our affairs he sent over here a versatile gentleman well known to many of us, Captain Guest. Providence works, as you know, in all kinds of mysterious ways. The combination of Lord French in his headquarters in France and Captain Guest manipulating the Press and the politicians here had the desired result, and, as Lord French tells you, the Government fell.

Well, I do not know which Lord French thinks was the chief villain of the whole piece, Lord Kitchener or myself. As it happens we both retained our old offices in the reconstructed Government, and while I should be the last—I shall always be the last—to belittle the splendid work which was subsequently done by the Ministry of Munitions, to the formation of which I was a party, and the principal party, and which in the early days, when there was a good deal of friction with the War Office, I strenuously backed with all my authority, yet Lord French appears to have forgotten that during the whole of the time he remained in command in France, and for months afterwards, the British Army in France and in Flanders lived and fought with great determination and with many successes entirely on the ammunition ordered, before the Ministry of Munitions came into existence, by the old regime.

Lord French's ridiculous suggestion that his action in this matter had something to do with his subsequent removal from the command is hardly worthy of serious notice. He remained in full command for more than six months, and though I heard strange rumours, which appear to have had more foundation in fact than I then believed, I never took the pains to inquire what part he had played, or whether he had played any part, in the newspaper campaign which he now claims to have inspired. When his retirement came, and I take myself the full and sole responsibility for it, it was for reasons that had no more to do with the supply of shells than with the next eclipse of the moon.

I am afraid I have kept you a long time, but before I part with Lord French I have one word more to add. His whole case is that he was obliged to do what he did because in the highest interest of the Empire it was essential to get rid of an apathetic Government, negligent of its first duty to the Army, and presided over by a supine and lethargic head. I will refresh Lord French's memory on this point. I have here in my hand a letter in his own writing addressed from the Headquarters of the British

Army in France, and dated—observe the date—May 20th, 1915. I say 'observe the date' because the Coalition Ministry, for which Lord French now claims a sort of paternal responsibility, was formed exactly three days earlier, on May 17th. It is a private letter to which I should certainly not have referred had not Lord French, who himself makes the freest use of secret and confidential documents, compelled me in his last article to do so. What I am about to read is only an extract, but I can assure you and the world that there is no qualifying context. As far as I am concerned the letter may be published *in extenso* to-morrow. The letter reads :

'My dear Prime Minister,

For two days I have been hesitating to add an iota to the troubles and anxieties which must weigh upon you just now ("I was forming the Coalition Government," Mr. Asquith interpolated, amid laughter). You have, however, shown me so much true, generous kindness throughout this trying campaign that I venture at this critical juncture to convey to you what is in my inmost thoughts. ("Now comes the important part," said Mr. Asquith). I am sure in the whole history of war no General in the field has ever been helped in a difficult task by the head of his Government as I have been supported and strengthened by your unfailing sympathy and encouragement.'

(Connaught Rooms, *June 2nd*, 1919.)"

CHAPTER XLI

THE DARDANELLES

The fundamental controversy—Ways through and ways round—The Schleswig Holstein Plan—Its advantages and difficulties—Mr. Lloyd George's Balkan proposal and the reasons against it—The proposal to attack the Dardanelles—Origin of the idea—Debates in the War Council—The 29th Division and its employment—Easterners and Westerners—Asquith's views—Views of Sir John French and General Joffre—The Carden Plan of naval attack—Its apparent advantages—Acceptance by the War Council—The Balkan Plan revived and dropped—Further controversy about the 29th Division—Its release for the Dardanelles—French aid promised—Failure of the Naval attack—The combined Military and Naval operation—Report of the Dardanelles Commission and Asquith's defence—Mr. Churchill's criticisms. J. A. S.

1915 Age 62 THE records of the War Council from November 1914 to April 1915 show the beginnings and developments of the fundamental controversy already glanced at which continued to be fought out between rival schools of strategists until the last months of the War. As the fight to a standstill proceeded on the Western front, the question was more and more often asked whether there might not be other ways of reaching the goal than the slow and sacrificial trench warfare in the "main theatre"; whether there might not be landings on the German coast; whether the Central Powers could not be outflanked by some brilliant diversion in the East which would isolate Turkey, bring Italy, Greece, and the wavering Balkan States in on the side of the Allies, threaten Austria, and open the door for carrying munitions and supplies to Russia. All these schemes looked tempting, and they seemed specially suited to the amphibious power of Great Britain. It was not their desirability but their practicability which caused controversy.

In a letter to the Prime Minister on 29th December, Mr. Churchill broached the idea of an invasion of Schleswig Holstein. The scheme was Lord Fisher's, and Mr. Churchill did little more than transmit it to his Chief, but he pointed out that, if feasible, it would have many advantages. It would at once threaten the Kiel Canal and possibly induce Denmark to join the Allies, and if that followed, the Baltic would be thrown open to the British fleet, and Russia, under cover of the British command of that Sea, would be enabled to land armies within ninety miles of Berlin. The plan required the blocking of the Heligoland *débouche* and the capture of a German island to act as a base for the fleet. The island was indicated, the blocking said to be feasible, and the total operations described as "combining all conceivable forms of pressure on Germany." Asquith was very ready to consider it, provided it passed the scrutiny of the military experts, but they discovered a great many difficulties, and Mr. Churchill's thoughts soon passed from the North Sea to the Mediterranean. Lord Fisher, nevertheless, continued to cherish the Schleswig-Holstein scheme and his attitude in the subsequent months was not a little coloured by his disappointment at its rejection.

Two alternatives now presented themselves; an expedition into the Balkans, and an attack on the Dardanelles. The first, as already recorded, was strongly urged in January 1915 by Mr. Lloyd George who even at this early date had become convinced that nothing was to be gained by assaults on the German trenches in France and who therefore proposed that the chief part of the British army then in France should be transferred to the Balkans and reinforced by the new armies as they became ready for the field. In this way he claimed that we should not only save Serbia, who was threatened with an Austro-German attack, but bring Greece, Bulgaria, and Rumania to our side, throw Turkey out of action, and seriously threaten Austria. All these were admitted to be very desirable objects, but the mere thought of taking any large body of British troops out of France filled both British and French commanders in that theatre with alarm; and the experts when consulted gave very discouraging opinions about the prospects of success in the Balkans.

II

There remained the possibility of an attack on the Dardanelles. That had been in the air since the Turks entered the War and had begun to take shape at the end of November when the War Council was discussing the measures which would need to be taken for the defence of Egypt. It was pointed out that the Committee of Imperial Defence when examining in time of peace the problem of the defence of Egypt, had favoured a counter-offensive at certain points on the coast of Asiatic Turkey, and Lord Kitchener agreed that, though the moment had not yet arrived, we should probably at some time have to strike a blow at the Turkish lines of communication. Then Mr. Churchill threw out the idea of an attack on the

1915 Age 62 Gallipoli Peninsula which, he said, was the ideal method of defending Egypt, since, if successful, it would give us the control of the Dardanelles and enable us to dictate terms to Constantinople; but, he was careful to add, that it was a very difficult operation requiring a large force.[1]

The Council held meetings on 7th, 8th, and 13th January, 1915. It now had before it (1) a communication from the Russian Government sent on 2nd January, asking for some effort to relieve the pressure on its armies in the Caucasus, and (2) a request from Sir John French for large reinforcements in France to enable him to undertake offensive operations which he was concerting with General Joffre. Lord Kitchener stated that in response to the latter appeal he was about to send Sir John the 29th Division and a Canadian Division. This raised the whole question of the right employment of the new British armies and brought the two schools into the field against each other. The one school was already convinced that there was no possibility of breaking through the German lines in the West, that further attempts would involve losses out of all proportion to anything gained, and that therefore it was the business of the Council to find an alternative threatre of war for the new armies. The other school replied that nowhere except on the Western front could a decisive success be obtained against Germany, the main enemy; that to withdraw troops from the West front or not to reinforce it might expose the Allies to a crushing and possibly irretrievable defeat; that the alternative theatres would require an immense expenditure of transport which would be exposed all the way to attack by mine and submarine, and when reached, had long and difficult lines of communication; whereas the Germans had all the time the advantage of the inner lines which enabled them to transfer their troops rapidly from east to west and from north to south.

Asquith stood between these two schools. He considered that there were certain British interests, such as the defence of Egypt, which required us to depart from the strict strategical theory which counselled concentration on the Western theatre. The abandonment of these in the hope that victory would finally win all back was, in his opinion, more than the British people could be expected to stand; and of the many schemes for protecting them, he considered the attack on Gallipoli to be by far the best, indeed, the only one worth considering. But he never departed from the view that the West was the main theatre on which a serious defeat would be far more dangerous than any other, and before he would consent to the diversion to other fronts of troops assigned to it, he always required to be assured that it was safe from any serious attack.

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[1] Minutes of War Council, 25th November, 1914.

Here was the main difficulty of the Dardanelles enterprise, and the cause eventually of its failure. The French from the beginning protested against the Easterners' theory that the West could be securely held by a moderate defensive force, while the new British armies were employed in Eastern adventures. They had, as it turned out, an adventure of their own in the East, for which at the end of the year they made an exception to this rule, but at this stage they could only with great reluctance be persuaded to assign a small contingent to any Eastern enterprise or to consent to the withdrawal of British troops for its support. They held that there was no security in a lightly held defensive line in the West, since no one could say when the Germans might withdraw large forces from the Russian front and hurl them on the lines in France. They were not willing that their country, in actual occupation by the enemy, should be regarded as anything but the main theatre, and they did not believe in the efficacy of any defence which was not strong enough, and not at all times prepared, to take the offensive. General Joffre, therefore, persisted in his plans for attacking the enemy in France, and Sir John French agreed with him.

III

On 13th January, Sir John came from France to attend the Council, and the whole question of the numbers of troops available and their use to the best advantage was exhaustively discussed. The general conclusion was that the diversion of any considerable force from France to the East was impossible at that moment, and the idea of a large operation by army and navy in the Dardanelles seems accordingly to have been ruled out. But at this point (13th January) Mr. Churchill came forward with a plan, worked out by Admiral Carden, the Commander-in-Chief in the Mediterranean, for demolishing the Turkish forts and opening the Dardanelles by naval action alone or with the support of only a small landing force. These forts were said to be armed mainly by old guns, and it was believed that three modern ships and about twelve old battleships would be able to dispose of them. The collapse of the Antwerp forts before the German howitzers was cited as a new fact superseding the old maxims which forbade ships to engage forts on shore, and it was confidently believed that the guns of the *Queen Elizabeth*

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would make short work of the Turkish defences. Mr. Churchill told the Council that the Admiralty was studying the Carden plan and believed that the forts could be systematically reduced in a few weeks. When the forts were reduced, the minefields could be cleared and the fleet could proceed up to Constantinople. Lord Kitchener drew a vivid picture, which greatly impressed the civilian members of the Council, of the Turks fleeing from Europe to Asia on its appearance, and it was assumed at this stage that the operation would be a purely naval one.

That seemed to solve the problem without compromising the army in France, and when sounded, the French Admiralty sent a favourable answer promising co-operation. The Grand Duke Nicholas also replied with enthusiasm and expressed his belief that the proposed attack would assist him materially in the Caucasus. Accordingly on 28th January, the War Council decided that preparations for it should be made without delay. At this meeting Mr. Churchill warned the Council that the operation undoubtedly involved some risks, and Lord Fisher rose from his seat remarking that he had not expected the question to be raised that day, and he had apparently intended to leave the room when Lord Kitchener followed him and induced him to remain. Apart from this no adverse comment was made and many strongly favourable opinions were expressed. The Council was informed that the necessary ships were already on the way out, and that the Commander-in-Chief expected the attack to succeed; in the contrary event it was said to be one of the special merits of the scheme, that it could be broken off without loss of prestige. On this understanding it was accepted by the Council as a purely naval operation.

IV

In the next three weeks the situation in the East became rapidly worse. Masses of German and Austrian troops were reported to be moving towards the Rumanian frontier; the Russians had suffered a serious reverse and were retiring in the Bukovina; Rumania was said to be cooling towards the Allies, and Bulgaria to be hardening against them. There was apparently real danger lest the Bulgarians should throw in their lot with the enemy and attack Serbian communications in Macedonia. Once more the question arose of sending a force to the Balkans with its base at Salonica, and for a week or ten days that project held the field. During this period the assumption that the attack on the Dardanelles would be a purely naval one still prevailed and it was suggested that any troops which could be spared from France should be sent to Salonica. The original plans for offensives in France had by this time been revised, and it was hoped that the 29th Division originally intended for France would be available for this Salonica enterprise. But when it came to the point Russia was unwilling to help, France was by no means encouraging, and the attitude of Greece was at least doubtful.

When the Council met on 16th February the Salonica scheme had faded out of sight, and the argument came back to the Dardanelles. It was now decided to despatch the 29th Division to Lemnos with the least possible delay, and to make arrangements for a further force to be sent from Egypt, "the whole to be available in case of necessity to support the naval attack on the Dardanelles." Three days later, however (19th February), Lord Kitchener declared himself unable to send the 29th Division until the situation in the West had cleared up. It now appeared that both Sir John French and General Joffre had taken a strong objection to any weakening of the front in France. The Russian defeat, they said, was of unknown magnitude and might release a large German force for an attack in the West. Lord Kitchener held it to be impossible to challenge this view and proposed therefore to keep the 29th Division in hand. At the same time he reminded the Council that the attack which had been sanctioned in the Dardanelles was a purely naval one for which the support of an army had not been thought necessary. There was therefore no reason why the delay in sending the 29th Division should interfere with it.

Mr. Churchill strongly expostulated, and both at this meeting and at the subsequent meeting on 24th February, argued that the Dardanelles was the decisive point at which a favourable blow could be struck for the defence of both East and West. It was not, he said, a question of sending the troops immediately to the Dardanelles, but of having them within reach in the Levant. When asked if he now contemplated a land attack or looked to the army to carry through the operation if the fleet failed, he replied that he did not. The case he contemplated was one in which the navy had almost succeeded, and in which a military force would make all the difference between failure and success. But in any case it was Mr. Churchill's view that we were now absolutely committed to seeing the attack through, and Lord Kitchener himself, while holding to his opinion that the time for sending the 29th Division was not yet, conceded that there could be no going back, and that, if the fleet could not do the business unaided, the army ought to see it through.

The "purely naval" operation was thus by this time insensibly gliding into a joint naval and military operation. But there was an important cross-current of opinion at this stage. One section of the Council held to the original idea of a purely naval operation and argued that, though it committed us to some action in the East, that action need not necessarily be the siege of the Dardanelles. The army, they said, ought not to be required to pull the chestnuts out of the fire for the navy, and if the navy failed we ought immediately to be ready to try something else. Salonica thus came up again.

There were now three opinions about the use of the 29th Division, and the character of the operation in the Dardanelles: (1) the view of the French and of the army in France that this Division could not be spared from the Western front; (2) the view of Mr. Churchill that it should be sent at once to the Dardanelles; (3) the view of another section that it should be employed in the East but not necessarily in the Dardanelles. On 26th February Lord Kitchener told the Council that while he felt he was accepting a considerable responsibility in not letting the Division go East, he was not willing to accept the much greater responsibility of giving up the power to reinforce in the West, if or when the line was broken, having special regard to the somewhat precarious position of the Russian army. He must await two events, he said, before coming to a final decision: (1) the clearing up of the situation in Russia; (2) some signs of the probable results of the naval operations in the Dardanelles. Once more Mr. Churchill pleaded for an immediate decision in favour of the Dardanelles, and once more the other Easterners pleaded for an expedition to influence the Balkan States, to which Lord Kitchener replied that they would be influenced by nothing except a Russian victory.

V

When the meeting of 26th February broke up Lord Kitchener was still unshaken in his resolve to withhold the 29th Division, and it was not till 10th March that he reported the situation in the West to be clear enough to enable him to raise his veto. On the same day he informed the Council that according to the best information available there were 120,000 Turks in or about the Dardanelles, and possibly another 120,000 for the defence of Constantinople. In the meantime the clearer situation in the West had enabled the French to promise a Division to co-operate in the attack on the Straits, which, welcome as it was, further stamped the enterprise as a joint naval and military operation. By this time the Admiralty were issuing warnings against too sanguine expectations from the naval attack, and when the Council met on the 19th it was face to face with the fact that Admiral de Robeck had failed to force the narrows in the attack of the previous day. On this day Mr. Churchill was authorised to inform the Admiral that he could "continue the operations if he thought fit," but on the 23rd the Admiral telegraphed that the mine menace was much greater than had been anticipated, and four days later sent a closely reasoned dispatch arguing for delay until a combined military and naval operation had been prepared. Sir Ian Hamilton, who had been appointed to command the land part of the expedition, was by this time at Lemnos, where the French Division, the Naval Divison, and an Australian Brigade had also arrived, and after inspecting the outer side of the Gallipoli peninsula he reported "large numbers of field-guns and howitzers available for defence, the arrangements for which appear to have been made with German thoroughness." All talk of breaking off the "purely naval operation" when it failed had now ceased, and it was clear that the Government were committed to a large and formidable joint military and naval operation. But both Sir Ian and the French Commander, General d'Amade, were clear that it could not take place at once or until the troops, who had been arranged for transport only, had been sent to Alexandria to be re-arranged for the landing at Gallipoli. 1915 Age 62

VI

These were the facts on which the Dardanelles Commission was afterwards asked to pass judgment, and since they have been coloured by much partisanship it seemed desirable to state them again in the simplest terms possible. It is easy, as Asquith said to the House of Commons when the Report of the Commission was debated,[1] to "make war after the event," and he would have been the last to deny that, if he and his colleagues and their professional advisers had known all that the Commissioners knew, serious mistakes would have been avoided. But the records abundantly justify his reply to that part of the Report which specially concerned him. It is not true that the War Council simply accepted Lord Kitchener's statement

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[1] 20th March, 1917.

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that there were no troops immediately available for operations in the East, and that they "took no steps to satisfy themselves by reports or estimates as to what troops were available then or in the near future." On the contrary, as Asquith told the House, they spent the best part of three days, 7th, 8th, and 13th January, surveying in the most comprehensive manner and in the greatest detail all the available sources in men and the calls which had to be made upon them," and Sir John French was sent for from France to assist in that investigation. Again, when the Commissioners said that there ought to have been an adjournment, after a provisional assent had been given to the naval attack, to enable the experts to examine the facts, that, Asquith replied, was exactly what took place. There was an adjournment from 13th January to 28th January, and in the fifteen days the Admiralty completely explored the situation and consulted the French Admiralty. Nor did Asquith admit for one moment that the experts, as the Commissioners suggested, were tongue-tied or paralysed by a nervous regard for their political superiors. He had never known them, he said, to show the least reluctance to give their opinion, invited or uninvited. Naval opinion was unanimous in favour of the scheme proposed as a practical naval operation. Lord Fisher preferred another scheme in a totally different sphere of war altogether, but he did not object to the Dardanelles scheme on any naval ground.

The Commission also suggested or implied that Lord Kitchener should have been overruled when he declined to send the 29th Division. On this, Asquith admitted that he himself had pressed Lord Kitchener to send the Division, but he warmly defended him against the charge of vacillation and maintained that the grounds on which he acted were grave and serious ones, backed by both the British and French Commanders in the field, on which it was impossible to overrule him. Finally to the observations of the Commissioners that the Prime Minister had been guilty of a "serious omission" in not summoning the Council between 19th March and 14th May, Asquith replied that the period dealt with by the Report ended on 23rd March, that the Commissioners had not asked him a single question on this point, and that, if they had asked him his answer would have been the quite simple one that after 19th March there had been no new departure of any kind in policy, and that the operations which took place were "the actual and necessary consequences of what had gone before, coupled with the decision of the Admiral not to continue the naval attack." They were, however, he added, the subject of daily, even hourly, communication between

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himself and his principal colleagues, and of long and careful discussion in the thirteen Cabinets which had taken place in these weeks.

To the criticisms of the Commissioners Mr. Churchill has added one of his own. He is of opinion that Asquith should have overruled Admiral de Robeck's decision not to persist in the naval attack and ordered him to persist after the failure of 18th March. "Looking back," he says,[1] "one can see now that this was the moment for the Prime Minister to intervene and make his view effective." In answer to that it seems sufficient to point to the state of opinion in the Admiralty as described by Mr. Churchill himself. A Prime Minister who at that moment could have overridden the opinion not only of Lord Fisher, but of Sir Arthur Wilson and Sir Henry Jackson, and ordered the officer in command to persist an operation which, for highly technical reasons, he thought undesirable and dangerous, would have needed a more than Napoleonic self-confidence. Admiral de Robeck alone was in a position to judge of the mine menace and of the appliances and personnel which he had at his disposal for dealing with it, and had his misgivings been justified by the result there would have been no limit to the censure which would have been passed on the Prime Minister, or for that matter on the First Lord of the Admiralty, if they had ventured to overrule him on such a point with such knowledge as they had at their disposal in London.

A more searching criticism of the transactions of these days may perhaps be inferred from the passage in which Mr. Churchill defends himself against the charge of having pushed the "purely naval operation" to the detriment of a well-conceived and well-concerted amphibious attack. Mr. Churchill writes :[2]

> "Nothing less than the ocular demonstration and practical proof of the strategic meaning of the Dardanelles and the effects of attacking it on every Balkan and Mediterranean Power would have lighted up men's minds sufficiently to make a large abstraction of troops from the main theatre a possibility. I do not believe that anything less than those tremendous hopes, reinforced as they were by dire necessity, would have enabled Lord Kitchener to wrest an army from France and Flanders. In cold blood it could never have been done. General Headquarters, and the French General Staff would have succeeded in shattering any plan put forward so long as it was a mere theoretical proposal for a large diversion of force to the Southern theatre. At one moment they would have told us that, owing to the Russian failure, great masses of Germans were returning to the West to deliver an overwhelming offensive; at

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[1] *The World Crisis*, 1915, p.235.

[2] *The World Crisis*, II, pp. 167–168.

another that they could not spare a round of ammunition and were in desperate straits for the want of it; at a third, that they had a wonderful plan for a great offensive which would shatter the German line and drive them out of a large portion of France. All these arguments were in fact used, and their effect was, as will be seen, to cripple the Dardanelles operations even after they had actually begun. How much more would they have overwhelmed any paper plan for an Eastern campaign. There would have been no Dardanelles with its hopes, its glories, its losses and its ultimate heartbreaking failure."

If this was in Mr. Churchill's mind from the beginning it is easier to understand where and how mistakes were made in the preparations for the Dardanelles campaign. To use the naval plan to kindle "tremendous hopes"; to let the doubters suppose that it could be broken off if it was not successful, and then, when it proved unsuccessful, to reinforce the "tremendous hopes" by the "dire necessity" of going on—this may have been the way to "light up men's minds" and to "wrest an army from France and Flanders," but it was not the way to procure a cool and objective examination of either the naval or the amphibious plan on its merits, or to secure the correct timing and sequence of the two operations, if both were accepted.

If it had been understood from the beginning that the naval attack could not be broken off, if unsuccessful, but that it must lead to the much more formidable naval and military enterprise, it is reasonable to suppose that the naval experts would have given the Carden plan a more careful scrutiny, and that the War Council would have been more cautious about sanctioning it as a preliminary experiment. As a preliminary to a joint naval and military attack it had every conceivable disadvantage, and most of all that it gave the Turks warning of what was coming, and so deprived the amphibious attack of the element of surprise. Asquith was more than justified in saying that no step in this enterprise was taken without the backing of the naval experts on all technical points, but up to 18th March it appears to have been in the mind of the experts that the naval attack could be discontinued if it proved too difficult or too costly, whereas it was in Mr. Churchill's mind from the beginning that it should be pressed at all hazards and the naval attack followed up immediately with the amphibious attack if the former failed. It is safe to say that when the naval plan was first proposed Asquith had no such *arrière pensée*. He believed, like his colleagues and the experts who fathered it, that, if unsuccessful, the naval attack could be broken off, and thought, as they did, that it offered an acceptable solution of the problem at a moment when it seemed impossible to divert troops from the Western front.

Mr. Churchill's method, if he had rightly described it, mixed propaganda for an idea which appealed to his imagination with the weighing of facts which needed the coolest exercise of the reasoning faculties. It had, moreover, the special disadvantage that by drawing colleagues and experts from one point to another under the dire necessity of going on, it won only a reluctant consent from men whose whole-hearted and enthusiastic co-operation was necessary if success was to be achieved. Lord Fisher, convinced against his will, rebelled at a critical moment; Sir John French and General Joffre remained constantly on guard; the Cabinet was all the time under the pressure of contending experts. Mr. Churchill speaks as if the objections of the British and French Commanders in France were personal prejudices and obsessions which it needed only a sufficient effort to break down. That never was so. They were the result of an acute sense of danger which could not be spirited away by the most glowing promises of success in any other field, and whether they were justified or not they had always to be reckoned with as serious obstacles to any large diversion of forces. 1915 Age 62

Asquith too was captured by the idea and he never for a moment threw back any part of his responsibility on to Mr. Churchill. Whenever the curtain is lifted he is seen urging both military and naval authorities to persevere and begging them to consider and consider again whether more effort could not be made and more troops spared. But beyond this he would not go. He would not overrule Lord Kitchener when he said that the 29th Division must be withheld while there was danger in the West, he would not order Admiral de Robeck to persist against his better judgment; he would not hold out against the evacuation of the Peninsula when all military opinion was finally in favour of it. Military historians in these days more and more incline to the view that in exhausting the power of the Turks, guarding Egypt against invasion, retrieving the situation in Mesopotamia, and opening the road to Palestine, the Dardanelles expedition made a far greater contribution to the final victory than was realised at the time. If this, as it well may be, is the final verdict, the mortifications and disappointments, the heartbreaking casualties, the errors of judgment and the lost chances which loomed large at the time will not seem greater than those which attended nearly all great operations undertaken by the Allies before the last months of the War. Very few of these can be said to have gained their immediate objective, and hardly any would have escaped censure, if exposed to the same scrutiny as the Dardanelles expedition.

CHAPTER XLII

THE FIRST COALITION

Lord Fisher's resignation—End of the Liberal Government—The need of a Coalition—Mr. Lloyd George's pressure—The exclusion of Lord Haldane—The Campbell incident—Distribution of offices—Mr. Redmond's refusal—The inclusion of Mr. Churchill—Asquith's visit to the Front—French as it was spoken—Work and relaxation. J. A. S.

1915 Age 62 WHATEVER may be said about the origins of the Dardanelles Expedition there can be no question about its results on the fortunes of Asquith's Government. When at the end of the heroic struggle which began on 23rd April the dominant positions of Gallipoli were still in the hands of the Turks, and Sir Ian Hamilton was obliged to report that conditions of trench warfare had supervened which he could not break down with the force at his disposal, the disappointment was in proportion to the hopes. For the dream of a spectacular success and triumphant march to Constantinople there was now substituted the prospect of a long and arduous struggle on the Western model with the problem of finding troops still unsolved. On 12th May Lord Fisher added the finishing touch by sending in his resignation, and Asquith knew that a crisis was at hand. He has himself related how when Lord Fisher absented himself from the Admiralty—at a moment when there was reasonable ground for thinking that the German fleet was coming out—he sent him a peremptory letter ordering him in the King's name to return at once to his post, how he returned but persisted in his resignation, and what high-flying conditions he required for its withdrawal. There were other Sea Lords who could have filled his place with entire satisfaction to the navy, but they were little known outside their profession, whereas Lord Fisher had a resounding public reputation which, as Asquith saw at once, would inevitably make his departure a cause of heated controversy in Parliament and the newspapers. Efforts to dissuade him[1] were continued to the

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[1] *Memories and Reflections*, II, pp. 90–94. I went myself at Asquith's suggestion to see him after he had left the Admiralty but was still at the First Sea Lord's residence, and was authorised to tell him that Mr. Churchill was leaving the Admiralty and would be succeeded by Mr. Balfour. This unhappily added fuel to the flames, and he stated in emphatic and somewhat racy language that he was even more unwilling to serve with Mr. Balfour than with Mr. Churchill. J. A. S.

22nd when his resignation was finally accepted, but in the meantime a communication had come from the leaders of the Opposition: 1915 Age 62

Mr. Bonar Law to Asquith.

LANSDOWNE HOUSE,
BERKELEY SQUARE, W.
May 17th, 1915.

DEAR MR. ASQUITH,

Lord Lansdowne and I have learnt with dismay that Lord Fisher has resigned, and we have come to the conclusion that we cannot allow the House to adjourn until this fact has been made known and discussed.

We think that the time has come when we ought to have a clear statement from you as to the policy which the Government intend to pursue. In our opinion things cannot go on as they are, and some change in the constitution of the Government seems to us inevitable if it is to retain a sufficient measure of public confidence to conduct the War to a successful conclusion.

The situation in Italy makes it particularly undesirable to have anything in the nature of a controversial discussion in the House of Commons at present, and if you are prepared to take the necessary steps to secure the object which I have indicated, and if Lord Fisher's resignation is in the meantime postponed, we shall be ready to keep silence now. Otherwise I must to-day ask you whether Lord Fisher has resigned, and press for a day to discuss the situation arising out of his resignation.

Yours very truly,
A. BONAR LAW.

The facts bear out Asquith's denial[1] of Lord French's boast that he decided this issue by his communications to newspapers and Opposition leaders about the shell shortage in France. But the head of the Government was of course bound to bear in mind the violent newspaper campaign against Lord Kitchener which was raging at this moment, and the inexpediency on military grounds of making the disclosures which would be necessary to counter it, if, as was extremely probable, that question also were raised in Parliament.

There was no mistaking the nature of Mr. Bonar Law's communication. It was a pistol at Asquith's head. Either the Government must be reconstituted or there would be debates in Parliament—debates damaging to the Government, damaging to the public interest, damaging probably to the Allies. Some urged him to hold out and dare the Opposition leaders to take a course which, on their

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[1] Speech in Connaught Rooms, 2nd June, 1919.

1915 Age 62 own showing, would be hurtful to the nation and the common cause. But however much he resented the pressure put upon him, he felt this to be unfair. He felt that it was not reasonable to expect the leaders of Opposition to remain silent spectators of events which justified the gravest anxiety, unless they shared the responsibility and were in a position to assure their supporters that everything possible was being done to cope with them. He saw that as head of the Government his own position would become intolerable if he had to come again and again to Parliament and ask it to accept his unsupported word that no avoidable mistakes had been made. It was not, as he has said, "merely a question of the particular situation with which we were at the moment confronted. The situation, in one form or another, under the existing conditions, was certain of recurrence, and I had come to the conclusion that the best chance of an effective prosecution of the War was to admit at once to a share in the counsels and responsibilities of Government leading men of all parties in the State."[1]

Mr. Lloyd George, who always stood to attention when the word "Coalition" was uttered, abounded in the same sense. On Monday, 17th May, the day when Mr. Bonar Law wrote to Asquith, he told Mr. Churchill (who thought the thing desirable, but not at that particular moment) that the leaders of the Opposition were in possession of all the facts about the shell shortage, and had given notice that they intended to demand a debate. He was convinced, he said, that the crisis caused by the resignation of Lord Fisher could only be surmounted by the formation of a National Coalition Government, and he had accordingly informed the Prime Minister that he would resign unless such a Government were formed at once.[2]

The coercion lay in the facts and not in the blunderbuss of his colleague or the pistol of his opponents. Asquith never believed that a Coalition Government would be a better instrument for carrying on the war, but he accepted it as a political necessity. A very hard necessity it was. He felt deeply the parting from his colleagues with whom he had fought the great battles of the previous years, and he saw the Liberal movement and the Liberal Party dissolving in the fog of war. The Liberal Ministers bore the blow with fortitude and dignity, and none spoke more warmly and generously of their gratitude and attachment to him as their Chief than those who found themselves excluded in order that places might be found for the new-comers. But one stroke almost reduced Asquith to despair, and this was the insistence of the Unionist leaders that Lord Haldane should be omitted from the new Government. He thought it incredible that responsible men could be influenced by the ignorant clamour raised in a section of the press against the man who had by common consent been the greatest Secretary for War in our time, and whose record as known to his colleagues was in almost all respects the opposite of the grotesque travesty of it which his assailants had put into circulation. Let alone the meanness of it, how could men who claimed to be serious statesmen and who knew the facts surrender to this campaign of ignorance and malice ?

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[1] *Memories and Reflections*, II, p. 98.
[2] *World Crisis*, II, p. 368.

But remonstrance and persuasion were alike useless. The plea was put in that, blameless as Lord Haldane might be, his unpopularity was a fact which would make him a burden and not a help to the Government. Some play also was made with an alteration which somewhat incautiously he had made in the Hansard report of the debate on the Curragh incident.[1] In the end the fact had to be faced that no Coalition Government would be possible, if Asquith insisted on Haldane's being included in it, and hateful as was the necessity of even seeming to desert an old friend, he decided that too much was at stake to permit him to go that length at the moment. But it was only with the greatest difficulty that he persuaded Sir Edward Grey to take the same view, and the reluctant submission of the Liberal members on this point was not an auspicious beginning of the Coalition.

It is a fact which can only be recorded that Asquith omitted to write to Lord Haldane and say to him what he felt so deeply and had said so emphatically to others. No doubt he had intended to see him, but the moment passed and Haldane went in silence. These things happen between the best of friends in times of stress and agitation, but the omission inflicted a wound which was never quite healed.

Another personal question which threatened serious consequences to the nascent Coalition was the proposed appointment of Mr. James Campbell to the Lord Chancellorship of Ireland. To this the Nationalists took strong exception on the ground that Mr. Campbell, though admittedly possessing the highest legal qualifications, was a strong partisan who had played a leading—and to them extremely distasteful—part in the Ulster agitation. Two letters show the lengths to which contention went on this point :

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[1] See *Richard Burdon Haldane—An Autobiography*, pp. 266–283.

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Asquith to Mr. John Redmond.

Secret.

10 Downing Street,
June 6th, 1915.

My dear Mr. Redmond,

Before I left for the Front, I wrote to Birrell and asked him to explain to you the facts in connection with Campbell and the Chancellorship. I heard nothing more, and on my return on Friday morning I found that the matter was causing much disquietude to you and to many of our friends.

The point was raised by Bonar Law in the very early stages of the negotiations before even the composition of the new Cabinet was settled. The Tories were "pegging out their claims" and wanted some kind of recognition both in Ireland and Scotland. In Scotland they were satisfied with Scott Dickson receiving a high place on the Bench, and expressed themselves as content if Campbell could be given the Great Seal. Both Lloyd George and I (though we were too preoccupied with other things to give the matter very careful attention) thought that this would not be a bad bargain. The Chancellor in Ireland does not appoint the judges, is not necessarily involved in or even consulted about the course of administration, and is and ought increasingly to be a mere judicial officer; a post for which every lawyer in Ireland would agree that Campbell has special qualifications. The result was that with our authority they offered the position to him, and he accepted it. This was before I received your letter to which reference is made in a telegram of yesterday.

When I got it and a message in the same sense from Birrell I wrote to Bonar Law in effect asking to be released, and undertaking to do what I could in the near future to make some other personal provision for Campbell; I had in my mind an English judgeship for which he is not badly fitted.

The reply I received was twofold: (1) that we were bound in honour to Campbell; (2) that if this particular plan was by consent abandoned, they must press their claim for some other place in the Irish administration. They even said that they would not have come into the Government unless they had understood that in some form or other that claim would receive recognition; and that they had purposely hit upon the Chancellorship as the post which we could most easily give away without arousing among our friends the suspicion that there could be any administrative change. With the Viceroy, Chief Secretary, and Law Officers and Vice President (of the Department of Agriculture) all our own men and a sympathetic Under Secretary, there could be no question of any change of policy.

That is how the matter stands at present. No actual appointment has yet been made.

I need not say that I should regard a declaration of hostility from you and your friends, to whom I am bound by so many ties of gratitude, and I hope I may say of service, as all but fatal to the prospects of the new Government. A situation of the gravest kind would then be created.

I know you will handle the matter with your wonted tact and consideration, and for the moment as quietly as may be. It may be that I shall find it necessary to bring it before the Cabinet on Tuesday morning. 1915 Age 62

I shall hope to hear from you on Monday.

Yours very truly,
H. H. Asquith.

Confidential. *May*, 1915.

Dear Mr. Redmond,

I need not assure you that this Campbell business has given me an infinity of trouble, and that I have spared no effort to find a possible solution. I think it only just to my new Unionist colleagues to say that they also have come to realise the difficulties of the situation, and have honestly striven to find a way of escape.

The claim of the Chancellorship for Campbell has now been withdrawn subject to suitable provision (which I have undertaken) being made for him; and to a place of minor importance being found for a Unionist in the Irish administration.

This is in my opinion in all the circumstances not an unreasonable or inequitable compromise. We have all, in face of the exigencies of the war, to make some sacrifices. I may fairly say that no one has made more than I have myself. Nothing but the most compelling sense of public duty could have induced me to be where I am, and surrounded as I am, and cut off as I am to-day.

Naturally before agreeing to the new suggestion I insisted on knowing who was proposed and for what office. The answer is John Gordon (who I imagine is from our point of view the least objectionable of their lawyers) for the Attorney Generalship, the present Attorney-General (Pim) receiving the vacant judgeship in the King's Bench.

Unless an arrangement on these lines can be effected, I am satisfied that the new Government cannot proceed with its task. And as I am equally satisfied that the Irish Government will be carried on on the same lines as now under the guidance of Birrell and Nathan, I feel bound in the exceptional circumstances in which we are placed to acquiesce.

I cannot suppose that such an arrangement will be more welcome to you than it is to me, but I hope that in the same spirit of patriotic self-abnegation, and with the same disposition to help old and tried friends which you have shown in the past, you will do your best to make it possible.

Yours very truly,
H. H. Asquith.

The matter was compromised for the time being, but Mr. Campbell was made Attorney-General in the following year and at the end of 1916 he became Lord Chief Justice, and in 1918 Lord Chancellor of Ireland. In 1921 the hatchet was buried between him and his old antagonists, and, having now been raised to the peerage as Lord Glenavy, he was appointed first Chairman of the Irish Free State Senate.

II

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Asquith had let it be publicly understood from the first—lest there should be any suspicion that there was to be a new departure in policy—that three of the principal offices would remain unchanged; those of Prime Minister, of Foreign Secretary, and of Secretary of State for War. Mr. Bonar Law was firm in his demand that his party must have an equal share of the higher offices, and Asquith did his utmost to meet him on this ground. Beyond these fixed points his idea of the Coalition was that it should include not only Liberal and Unionist but Irish and Labour representatives. One Labour member, Mr. Arthur Henderson, came in as President of the Board of Education, but Mr. John Redmond declined on the ground that "the principles and history of the party he represented made the acceptance of the offer impossible." Asquith tried his utmost to move him, and the more so since he was aware that the appearance of Sir Edward Carson, who was among the Unionist nominees, in a Cabinet in which there was no Nationalist representative would have a chilling effect in Southern Ireland. But Mr. Redmond was not to be persuaded, and he not only persisted in declining the invitation for himself, but expressed an emphatic opinion that Sir Edward Carson ought not to have been asked. The correspondence shows the course of events:

Asquith to Mr. John Redmond.

Secret. *May 24th*, 1915.

MY DEAR MR. REDMOND,

I understand that you are to have a meeting of your Party tomorrow, in Dublin.

I am sorry to appear to be importunate, but I attach more value than I can describe to your active participation in the new national Government.

May I suggest that in the circumstances you should perhaps bring the matter before your Party, and impress upon them the great importance which I attach to your co-operation?

Yours very truly,
H. H. ASQUITH.

Mr. John Redmond to Asquith.

May 25th, 1915.

MY DEAR MR. ASQUITH,

I duly received your letter of yesterday, and I telegraphed to you that the Irish party had unanimously approved of the attitude which I had taken with reference to your invitation to join the Cabinet.

I would like to say that I feel more sorry than words can express at having to refuse any request coming from you, or at having the appearance of refusing any small assistance to you in the extraordinary difficulties of the position in which you stand, which difficulties I fully realise, are not at all of your making. Politically, it was quite impossible, as I rather think you must have realised from the first, for me to accept your invitation. Personally I am most grateful to you for your action in the matter.

I feel bound, however, to repeat in this note the strong objection which I telegraphed to you the other day, to the inclusion, under the circumstances of the moment, of Sir Edward Carson in the new Cabinet. For the Irish people it will mean installed in power the leader of the Ulster revolters, who, the other day, was threatening hostilities to the forces of the Crown and the decision of Parliament. It will arouse grave suspicion, and will most certainly enormously increase the difficulties of my friends and myself.

Very truly, yours,
J. E. Redmond.

Small wonder that between the casting-off of old friends and the fitting-in of the new men Asquith should have described the formation of this Government as "the most uncongenial job that it has ever been my lot to carry through." One phase of it is revealed in a note in his own handwriting:

"On the morning of Tuesday, 25 May, I commissioned Ll. George to see B. Law and to point out
(1) The resentment of our party at the exclusion of Haldane.
(2) Their resentment at the inclusion of Carson.
(3) The impossibility from a party point of view of both Admiralty and W.O. being in Tory hands.
(4) The impossibility of having a Tariff Reformer at the Exchequer.
Later in the day the Tory leaders in substance accepted the situation, Ll. G. going to Munitions, and McKenna to Exchequer."

Asquith had a sincere and almost paternal affection for Mr. Churchill, and not the least disagreeable of his tasks was that of breaking to him that circumstances made it impossible that he should remain at the Admiralty:

Asquith to Mr. Winston Churchill.

10 Downing Street,
May 30, 1915.

My dear Winston,

I have your letter. You must take it as settled you are not to remain at the Admiralty.

I am sure you will try to take a large view of an unexampled situation. Everyone has to make sacrifices; no one more than I, who have to part company with valued and faithful colleagues who have served me loyally and well. I hope to retain your services as a member of the new

1915 Age 62 Cabinet, being, as I am, sincerely grateful for the splendid work you have done both before and since the war.

I cannot of course make any definite offer to any particular place, until I am able to realise and appraise the competing claims of others.

Yours always,
H. H. A.

Mr. Churchill came into the new Government as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, but he had the consolation of remaining a member of the War Council.

Since the main object of the Coalition was the political one of persuading all parties that they were fairly represented in the Government, the balancing of parties was essential to it, but that process, as Asquith has said, "involved many nice and some invidious personal questions," and at the end it remained a hazardous question whether the new combination was fitter than the old for the conduct of the war. The changes in the offices of most importance for that purpose were the appointment of Mr. Balfour to be First Lord of the Admiralty, of Mr. Lloyd George to be Minister of Munitions, and of Mr. McKenna to succeed Mr. Lloyd George as Chancellor of the Exchequer. Mr. Bonar Law became Colonial Secretary, but it was understood that he would be one of the Ministers specially responsible for the conduct of the war. Lord Lansdowne joined the Government at Asquith's special request, but without portfolio. A full list of the members of the Cabinet will be found in an appendix to this chapter.

III

On the evening of 30th May Asquith went to France and remained there for the next five days, staying with Sir John French at St. Omer, visiting the headquarters of the various armies, going into Ypres and Bailleul, and as far forward as his military custodians would let him, talking to all ranks, making his own inquiries into the technical branches and into the sufficiency of transport, equipment, and supply. He had a sure instinct for getting on with the soldiers. His modesty and deference to them on their own ground, the pertinence of the few questions that he asked, and his quick grasp of their problems and difficulties inspired them with confidence and respect.[1] He liked them and they liked him; and not seldom on returning from these journeys he spoke of the atmosphere at the Front as cleaner and pleasanter than the atmosphere in Whitehall.

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[1] General Haig remarked on his extraordinary capacity of recording in a memorandum the results of long conversations, in which he had not taken a note, without a single error in names of places or technical military detail.

Asquith to his Wife.

General Headquarters,
British Army in the Field.
June 1, 1915.

I had a busy and interesting day yesterday. Started at 10 in motor with Gen. Ducane who commands the Artillery—a very intelligent man, with whom I had much talk about shells, munitions, etc., very different from the ignorant and hysterical stuff which has recently been brought to us from the front. I first visited Sir H. Plumer who has succeeded Smith Dorrien in command of the 2nd Army: a regular type of the old soldier, and I should think competent though not clever. We then drove through Popperinghe to a high point called the Scherpenberg, 3 or 4 miles from Ypres. It was a very fine day, and the view was wonderful, stretching as far as Ostend and the sea. Ypres lay in the near distance smoking, but with 2 towers still almost intact, and right up to it and as far as one could see not a trace of war or devastation, trees uncut, crops growing, people working in the fields, just as in England. Through glasses one could see Wytschaete—our weakest spot, which we have never been able to retake—the English and German trenches running parallel, not more than 100 yards apart. Not a soldier was visible, and except for a little cloud of shrapnel in the sky pursuing an aeroplane, not a shot was fired. I lunched at Bailleul with Gen. "Putty" (Gen. Sir W. Pulteney), whose 2 aides-de-camp are Pembroke and Castlereagh, and went over the Hospital. They have passed 47,000 wounded through it, and all the cases I saw were very bad ones, mostly head wounds, and one officer dying of the gas. I afterwards saw a farewell parade of the 16th Brigade who were going to Ypres—a fine lot of men, in the trenches since October. I made them a little speech, and they gave me three cheers. We then motored on to Nieppe, where there is a huge factory which they have converted into a bathing and cleaning place: large caldrons and vats of hot water full of naked Tommies, whose clothes were being steamed and disinfected and dried. Thence to La Motte, the Cavalry headquarters, a very nice country château. Gen. Byng commands, and one of his chief staff officers is Anthony Henley, whom I was delighted to see. . . . In the evening I dined across the way with French, and then had 1½ hours *tête-à-tête* with him: on the whole quite satisfactory. I am going to Haig's army to-day, and on Wednesday I meet Joffre and Foch.

At the end of this visit he wrote to Sir John French:

Asquith to Sir John French.

General Headquarters,
British Army in the Field.
June 3rd, 1915.

My dear Field Marshal,

I am very glad to have had the opportunity which your hospitality has afforded me of seeing at close quarters the British Army in the Field.

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I find it from top to bottom—from those in the highest commands to the latest arrivals among the rank and file—animated by the same spirit, united in the same purpose, and inspired by the same confidence. They love their country; they believe in the justness of its cause; they are determined to win; and there is not a man among them who doubts of ultimate and assured victory.

Never in our history has an army showed itself more worthy of a great task. After a searching examination, I have nothing but praise for the organisation of a force which, in numbers and equipment, vastly exceeds any which it has ever fallen to the lot of any British General to command. There is practically no misconduct or indiscipline; the percentage of sickness is lower than at home; the soldiers trust their officers; the officers set an example to their men; the Staff is brilliantly directed; every branch of the force believes in its leaders; and no Commander had ever more reason to count upon the faith and devotion of his Army than yourself.

My object in coming to you was to bring the Army a message of confidence and pride from the King, the Government and the people of the Empire. My last word, before I return, is to assure you that they are never unmindful of the heroism and endurance, which is adding every day a fresh page to our glorious annals; and that they will spare no effort or sacrifice to support you to the end.

Believe me to be,
Very faithfully yours,
H. H. A.

F.M. Sir John French.

At this time Asquith was completely unaware of the part which the Field-Marshal subsequently claimed to have played in overthrowing his previous Government.

A month later he was again at St. Omer, and again visited Ypres, and together with Kitchener attended a military conference at Calais. A letter to his wife gives a vivid glimpse of this conference:

Asquith to his Wife.

General Headquarters,
British Army in the Field.
July 6th, 1915.

. . . I arrived near midnight with my companions, civil and military, at Calais, where we spent the night at the Station Hotel. The French came there early this morning from Paris (the journey now takes seven hours) and our Conference began at 10 and lasted till 1. I sat in the Chair, having on one side of me Viviani, Millerand, Augagnau, and Sir J. French; and on the other K., A.J.B. (Balfour), Crewe and Delcassé, with General Joffre *vis-à-vis*. I opened the proceedings with a short harangue (carefully typewritten) in French, and we had quite a good discussion for the best part of three hours. I have never heard such a quantity of bad French spoken in my life—genders, vocabulary, and pronunciation equally execrable. . . . K. distinguished himself the most of the whole lot—his French (such as it is) is fluent, though he says "au fin" etc., and he was far and away the best on questions of strategy. Not one of the French could speak or apparently understood (except perhaps Delcassé) a single word of English; they are marvellously ill-educated. I thought Viviani on the whole the cleverest of them: though he looks sleepy and commonplace. Joffre I thought distinctly less of than last time. We came to a pretty complete agreement, and the whole thing was quite a success. After lunch the French returned to Paris, and A.J.B. and Crewe to London. French (Sir J.) went off to Chantilly, and K. and I came here, where I am installed in my old quarters. We shall visit the Belgians to-morrow and go southwards through the lines of the Second Army. . . .

At the beginning of August he went north and spent three days in visiting the fleet, on one of which he made a stirring speech to a great muster of seamen.

During the next eighteen months he was repeatedly at the front or attending conferences in Paris, Calais, or Boulogne with French Ministers and Generals. His French on these occasions was described as "scholar's French," accurate rather than fluent. He expressed his meaning carefully and precisely, and what was equally important, avoided saying what he did not mean to say. The impression that he made on French soldiers and statesmen was that of being very English and wholly straightforward. Clemenceau called him *un homme très honnête*, which in the mouth of the "Tiger" was high praise.

At the end of March and beginning of April 1916 he was away for ten days, first visiting the battlefield of the Marne, thence to Paris for a Conference, and from Paris going on to Rome, where he saw the Pope. He has described this visit in *Memories and Reflections*. "Our talk was naturally confined to the War and German topics; the Pope carefully refraining from indicating any leaning of his own to either side, and I giving no encouragement to a feeler which he incidentally threw out that he might act as mediator." On his way back he visited the King of Italy at his Headquarters, and for the next two days drove with him to various points on the fighting front.

Asquith to his Wife.

PARIS,
March 29th, 1916.

. . . The Conference was much what one might have expected—30 people of six or seven nationalities sitting round a table and emitting a good deal of gas. However, no harm was done, and we all parted good friends.

Briand has sent me quite an amusing album of snapshots of the various

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persons and phases, which I will bring home. It is a relief not to have read or seen a single English newspaper since Saturday, but Bongie (Sir Maurice Bonham Carter) has had nervy telegrams from Bonar Law and Montagu. It is a pity that the Coalition has not a larger allowance of English phlegm.

We spent to-day in a very interesting drive along the battlefield of the Marne, which saved Paris from capture in September, 1914. The long lines of graves with little flags are very pathetic. Very few people realise that the Germans were as near Paris as Slough, or even Hounslow, is to London. . . .

Asquith to his Wife.

ITALY (in train),
Fri., Mar. 31*st*, 1916. 11-30 *a.m.*

I have not heard a word from anyone in England since I left; I hope to find letters when I arrive at Rome this afternoon. I gave Bertie a letter to send on to you before I left Paris yesterday morning.

We started from the Gare de Lyon at eleven in the forenoon and I have never travelled in such luxury—large saloons, eating car, wonderfully appointed bedrooms, etc.; no stoppages except now and then to take in water. Apart from servants and attendants there are only four of us aboard—Bongie, O'Beirne, Hankey and self. We are due to get to Rome at three, where we shall have to grapple with rather a trying programme of fêtes and ceremonies, from now to Sunday afternoon. The weather is beautiful—bright sun and quite a warm air.

It is a pleasure to see Italy again, especially after France, where till you get near Savoy the outlook is almost always tame.

I have only seen one English paper since I left—I think last Thursday's; so I have a very scanty idea of what is going on.

4 p.m. We arrived at Rome punctually at three, and drove here (British Embassy) through crowded streets, the people cheering enthusiastically. I was in a car with Salandra, the Prime Minister. I am now going to see the two Queens and the Duke of Genoa. In the evening we have an official dinner at Sonnino's. The Rodds are very hospitable. . . .

From the end of 1914 onwards Asquith spent many of his Saturdays and Sundays at Walmer Castle, which was lent to him by Lord Beauchamp, Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports—an office which the King had pressed Asquith to accept for himself, but which he had declined as beyond his means. Walmer was a change rather than rest—for business followed him at all hours wherever he went—but it was also a convenient half-way house for soldiers and others coming from the front, and many important conferences and conversations took place there without becoming known to the public.

There were no holidays for any Ministers in these years, and least of all for the Prime Minister to whom in the last resort everybody brought everything, and whose days were crowded with con-

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ferences, Committees, Cabinets, and unceasing interviews with colleagues and experts who had to be seen, and foreign notabilities who could not be neglected. The extreme rapidity with which Asquith worked, and the apparent ease with which he made the transition from one subject to another left the impression that the effort cost him nothing. It would be nearer the truth to say that it was exhausting in proportion to its efficiency. Physically strong as he was, he paid for it in after years ; and if he held up under the strain, it was largely thanks to his lifelong habit of shutting off his few hours of leisure from the day's work and anxieties. Some of those who saw him only in these hours expressed a portentous surprise that he could, as they put it, " have the heart " to play bridge or golf, while the fate of the country hung in the balance ; but it was precisely this faculty of relaxing the strain in the short time off duty which enabled him to bear it during the ten or more hours of the working day, which was his portion for years together. His wife recalls that sometimes, when she had urged him to go to bed after an exceptionally trying day, she found him reading the Bible or Boswell's *Life of Johnson*. Whatever the stress, he never missed saying good night to the children, and often heard his little son say his prayers. It pleased him to say that he was naturally indolent, and he rather encouraged others to think so, but the hardest worker was hard put to it to keep pace with him when he was at work, and work during these years was unceasing and immensely laborious and responsible.

APPENDIX

The following were the members of the first Coalition Cabinet formed in May 1915 :

Prime Minister and First Lord of the Treasury.	Mr. Asquith (L.).
Lord Chancellor.	Sir S. Buckmaster (L.).
Lord President of Council.	Marquess of Crewe (L.).
Lord Privy Seal.	Lord Curzon (U.).
Chancellor of the Exchequer.	Mr. McKenna (L.).
Minister without Portfolio.	Lord Lansdowne (U.).
Minister of Munitions.	Mr. Lloyd George (L.).
Foreign Secretary.	Lord Grey (L.).
Colonial Secretary.	Mr. Bonar Law (U.).
Secretary for India.	Mr. Chamberlain (U.).
Home Secretary.	Sir John Simon (L.).
Secretary for War.	Lord Kitchener.
First Lord of Admiralty.	Mr. Balfour (U.).
Secretary for Scotland.	Mr. McKinnon Wood (L.).
Chancellor of the Duchy.	Mr. Churchill (L.).
President of Board of Trade.	Mr. Runciman (L.).
President, Local Government Board.	Mr. Long (U.).
President, Board of Agriculture.	Lord Selborne (U.).
President, Board of Education.	Mr. Arthur Henderson (Lab.).
First Commissioner of Works.	Mr. Harcourt (L.).
Chief Secretary for Ireland.	Mr. Birrell (L.).
Attorney General.	Sir Edward Carson (U.).

CHAPTER XLIII

EASTERNERS AND WESTERNERS

The Coalition Cabinet and the Dardanelles—Appointment of the Dardanelles Committee—Objections and delays—Starving and storming—Conflicting claims of East and West—The Suvla Bay landing—Results of its failure—General Joffre and the Cabinet—The dominant theatre—French plans and British objections—Cross-purposes between British and French—An unexpected offer and its withdrawal—Battle of Loos—The Salonica Expedition—Entry of Bulgaria—Asquith's summary of the position—The Dardanelles and Salonica. J. A. S.

So far as the Dardanelles Expedition was concerned, the results of the change of Government were almost wholly bad. The process of Cabinet-making had caused serious delay at a moment when quick decision was specially to be desired, and divided counsels were not less but more likely when all the talents from all the parties had been gathered to renew the argument about the allotment of forces between East and West. "Whereas practically," says Mr. Churchill, "all the important matters connected with the War had been dealt with in the late Government by four or five Ministers, at least a dozen powerful, capable, distinguished personalities, who were in a position to assert themselves, had now to be consulted. . . . At least five or six opinions prevailed on every great topic, and every operative decision was obtained only by prolonged, discursive, and exhausting discussions." The whole question of the Dardanelles had now to be explained and reargued from the beginning, and the new men naturally and rightly required to be informed of every important step in the past conduct of the War. They seem on the whole to have come to the conclusion that their predecessors were not so black as they had been painted, and Mr. Churchill has compared the effect produced on Unionist Ministers by Lord Kitchener's review of the work of the War Office under his direction to "that which is often produced upon the House of Commons when a Government, having long been raved at in the Press and on the platform, is at last in a fully ranged debate permitted to expose its own case."[1]

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[1] *World Crisis*, 1915, p. 391.

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The new Cabinet met for the first time on 26th May, and the fully ranged debate lasted into the first week of June, when it was decided that the actual conduct of the War must be relegated to a smaller body, and the Dardanelles Committee was appointed. This consisted of the Prime Minister, the Secretary for War, the Minister of Munitions, the First Lord of the Admiralty, Mr. Churchill, Sir Edward Carson, Mr. Bonar Law, Lord Lansdowne, Lord Crewe, Lord Curzon, and Lord Selborne. When reinforced by the experts it proved an unwieldy body for the taking even of provisional decisions, but enough active spirits still remained outside to make it necessary to debate most of its decisions again in full Cabinet. Thus though it decided on 9th June to reinforce the Dardanelles with the three remaining Divisions of the New Army and monitors, sloops, and submarines, there was still, as Asquith reported to the King on 18th June, " considerable divergence of opinion " in the Cabinet, and some Ministers " objected strongly to the steps proposed on the ground that they committed the Government to an offensive strategy on a large and increasing scale." Asquith replied that both the experts at home and the General and Admiral on the spot were agreed that we should aim at a " starving " rather than a " storming " operation, and that there was good ground for hoping that " the additional forces might be the means of cutting off the Turks' supplies both of men, food, and ammunition." Consent was given in the end, but the new Cabinet had the same fear as the old that it was being led on into an operation of far greater magnitude than was disclosed by its advocates, and that each reinforcement would be the prelude of a demand for more.

It may be debated for ever whether the delays were the cause of the eventual failure in the immediate object, or whether the Turks with their great resources in man-power and unexpected wealth in munitions would not have manned the trenches in Gallipoli in time to meet each reinforcement of the new well-advertised attack, whenever it was sent out. Mr. Churchill expresses the belief that if Asquith " had possessed, or been able to acquire plenary authority, and had he been permitted to exercise it during May and June without distraction or interruption, he would have taken the measures which even at this stage would have resulted in securing a decisive victory." But it was inherent in the circumstances of the Great War that no Prime Minister ever could or ever did exercise this plenary authority. All Prime Ministers in all the countries had to consider formidable opponents who could not be swept off the board without provoking controversies that might have been fatal to national unity, and even if they could dispose of these, they had to bear in mind the views of other Governments which were equally interested in their decisions. 1915 Age 62–3

It was in fact impossible to concentrate upon the Dardanelles expedition as its zealous advocates desired. All through the summer the unceasing conflict between the demands of East and West went on. Disappointing as the results of the British and French offensives on the Western front during the spring months had been, the French were persuaded that safety required them to keep the offensive, and were preparing for another grand joint attack in the autumn. Between May and August the Russians suffered immense reverses on the Eastern front, and the noise of their retreat and of the fall successively of Przemyszl, Lemberg, and Warsaw resounded through Europe. By the beginning of August they had been completely driven out of Galicia, a few weeks later the Germans were at the gates of Riga, and Germans and Austrians between them in occupation of 125,000 square miles of Russian territory. Military historians may argue that the Germans in the long run contributed to their own downfall by these immense and exhausting efforts which always just failed in their object of putting the Russian armies out of action. But at the time they were highly disturbing to the Allies and provided the French with reasonable ground for saying that troops could not be diverted from the West front lest German armies released from the East should be swung round to attack the lines in France.

II

This was the situation when once more the reinforcements for the Dardanelles proved insufficient and the forces landed in Suvla Bay on 6th August failed to capture the dominant summits of the peninsula. Whatever the causes of this failure, the result was only too clear; the attackers were once more thrown back on a stubborn trench warfare in which large new forces would be needed to ensure success. Asquith had built high hopes on the Suvla Bay landing, and if there was any moment in which he lost his habitual composure it was when the news came that it had failed. I saw him two days later, and he went backwards and forwards over the operation on the map, commenting rather grimly on certain phases of it and pointing to where it came within a hairbreadth of success. It was, he said, "exasperating," his worst disappointment since the beginning of the War. He had consented to the "storming" instead of the "starving" operation on the representation that it was all but sure of success and he was now back at the old controversy about the claims of the two fronts for reinforcements with even less prospect of settling it satisfactorily than in the previous months.

For by this time Ministers had reviewed the situation on the West front, having invited Sir John French to come over and confer with them about the strategy of the coming months as a preliminary to a conference between the British and French military authorities. Sir John came on 3rd July and attended the Cabinet accompanied by Sir William Robertson and Sir Henry Wilson. At the end of this meeting Asquith drew up a brief memorandum expressing the views of the Cabinet :

> 10 Downing Street,
> Whitehall, S.W.
>
> We must keep our hands free in view of the unforeseenable contingencies of a war which is being carried on in so many different theatres. Every promise or assurance must be subject to that reservation.
>
> With that reserve, we regard the Western theatre as, for the time being, the dominant one, and we shall support the allied army there with all the available strength we can command, as our new armies become complete in men and equipment. We are willing to indicate generally the numbers of troops which will be available at different dates so far as we can foresee.
>
> For the moment we believe that the best service we can render may probably be to be ready to take over additional lengths of the French line, which will set free so many French troops either for offensive or defensive purposes.
>
> In view of the still imperfect equipment of our New Army in the matter of artillery ammunition, and of the uncertainties of the strategic situation, it should be strongly represented to the French that they should defer any offensive operations. If they nevertheless think it necessary to undertake such an operation, Sir John French will lend such co-operation with his existing forces as, in his judgment, will be useful for the purpose, and not unduly costly to his army.
>
> We shall not depart from this arrangement without previous communication between the Allies.

An affirmation that the West was the dominant theatre was what the French wanted, but having got it, General Joffre was more persistent than ever about his offensive, and on 20th August Kitchener had to report to the Cabinet that his remonstrances had been useless. The French, he said, thought their plan necessary both on military and on political grounds, the political being mainly the situation in Russia, and though he himself was very reluctant to co-operate and extremely dubious of the military result he could only advise the Cabinet that "we could not without serious and perhaps fatal injury to the Alliance refuse co-operation." To this the Cabinet deferred.

Then began the strangest game of cross-purposes that had yet been played between French and British. It now appeared that the struggle between Easterners and Westerners had its parallel in France and that a powerful group of politicians was advocating a French expedition to the East under the command of General Sarrail. This was afterwards to land the British Government in a second Eastern adventure on the compulsion of the Ally which all the summer had been protesting against any troops being diverted from the West, but at the moment it took the extremely welcome form of the offer of large reinforcements for the Dardanelles. Asquith's letters to the King reflect the surprise, pleasure, and mystification which the offer produced among British Ministers:

Asquith to the King.

Sept. 1 and 3. Mr. Asquith with his humble duty to Your Majesty has the honour to report that the Cabinet met on Wednesday and to-day.

The main subject for discussion at both meetings was the unexpected offer of the French Government to send four Divisions, in addition to the two Divisions now on the Peninsula, to the Dardanelles. It is intended by the French that the whole two Divisions should operate on the Asiatic side of the Straits. They ask us to transport two thirds of the force. The "Eastern Army," as it is styled, is to be constituted on September 24th.

The various aspects of the matter were considered by the Cabinet and in the intervals between its meetings by the Dardanelles Committee.

After much discussion it was resolved that Lord Kitchener should communicate to M. Millerand the gratification of the British Government and an assurance of its willingness to co-operate by the provision of transport and by replacing the two British Divisions. He was to add that we assume that the diversion of so large a force from the Western theatre involves a reconsideration of the "grand offensive" in that arena, which was in contemplation; and to point out that a rapid and decisive success in the Dardanelles, apart from its direct political and strategic effects, would set free a considerable force of British troops for such operations as might then seem to the Allies most necessary in the interests of their joint cause.

Lord Kitchener is to have a personal interview with M. Millerand early next week.

Sept. 8 and 10. Sir John French (who has been here during the week) reports that General Joffre had informed him that the dispatch of French troops to the Dardanelles would not begin until after the issue of the contemplated operations in the West. General Wilson has been unable to obtain, in France, any authentic information, and Lord Kitchener leaves this evening with Sir John French and Col. Hankey for Calais,

> where he will meet M. Millerand and endeavour to extract from him what are precisely the French intentions.
>
> Sept. 14 and 17. Lord Kitchener reported the result of his interview with M. Millerand and General Joffre. General Joffre's Staff is engaged in preparing a plan for the contemplated French operations in the Dardanelles.

This plan never materialised, for in the next few weeks the French Easterners switched off from the Dardanelles and persuaded their Government that an expedition to Salonica was more urgent. By this time Bulgaria was evidently coming into the War on the enemy's side, and it was said to be imperative to do something to save Serbia which was threatened by a new Austro-German attack. The situation was now more tangled than ever. The French, while persisting in their grand offensive against our advice, had consoled us by promising large reinforcements for the Dardanelles. Balancing the two things, British Ministers had resigned themselves to the French offensive, but no sooner had they done this than they were faced with the new French orientation which was to leave them, after an exhausting struggle in the West, with yet another Eastern expedition on their hands and the problem of reinforcing the Dardanelles single-handed, if they could.

III

Kitchener's doubts about the grand offensive in France were more than justified. It began on the Champagne front on 25th September, and was supported by a British attack between the La Bassée canal and Lens, which led to desperate fighting in and around Loos for the best part of three weeks. Though great victories were claimed and some ground was gained, the results were inconclusive, and at the end the Germans were as firmly entrenched as ever on both fronts. In the meantime M. Venizelos was every day calling more loudly for the despatch of a British and French army to Salonica for the rescue of Serbia and intimating that his position would become intolerable and the allegiance of Greece extremely doubtful if it were not sent. In the last days of September and beginning of October, while the battle in France was still raging, the British Government found themselves confronted with this demand and with the highly disconcerting fact that the French had consented to it without consulting them, and now expected, indeed were relying on, them to follow their lead. The Cabinet letters tell the story :

> Sept. 22. The Main subject of discussion was the mobilisation of the Bulgarian army and the important appeal to the British Government

transmitted by Sir F. Elliott from M. Venizelos asking for the promised dispatch of 150,000 British and French troops to the aid of Greece and Serbia. Lord Kitchener was absent, being still detained in France, and it was agreed to reply to the Greek Government that we could not consider the military aspects of their proposals until his return. It was resolved that the whole matter should be considered by the Dardanelles Committee the following day (to-day).

Sept. 28 and Oct. 1. Mr. Asquith with his humble duty to Your Majesty has the honour to report that the two meetings of the Cabinet held this week were largely taken up with discussions on the military situation in France and the progress of the offensive operations. Much delay has apparently been caused by the weather and the issue is still by no means decided. It seems to be the intention of the French to resume the offensive on a large scale in Champagne to-morrow (Sunday). . . . The remaining topic which occupied the attention of the Cabinet was the situation in the Balkans and the appeal of M. Venizelos for the despatch of British and French troops to Salonica. The French at once agreed to comply and a French division from Cape Helles is now on its way to, and has possibly arrived at, Salonica. It was impossible for us in the circumstances to hold back, and after consultation with Sir I. Hamilton the 10th Division had been removed from Suvla to Mudros, where it is being refitted for the same destination. Both a French and an English Cavalry regiment are under orders to proceed there from Egypt.

The last chance of preserving the neutrality of Bulgaria has now disappeared. It is clear that her mobilisation was instigated by the German Powers, and that it is contemplated to put her army under the command of German officers. The result, unhappily, is likely to be that Serbia will move in her own defence upon Bulgaria—a step which will unite the whole Bulgarian army and nation, now much divided and discontented at the prospect before them, and enable King Ferdinand and his Allies to represent Serbia as the aggressor, and as fighting to retain territory in Macedonia to which the whole world including the Entente Powers, have admitted Bulgaria is morally entitled.

Thus ends one of the impotent chapters in the history of diplomacy. The discredit for the result must be divided between Russia, but for whom Bulgaria would probably have been brought in months ago, and Serbia whose obstinacy and cupidity have now brought her to the verge of disaster.

The last entry is coloured with an emotion which is rather unusual in these communications, but Asquith had been greatly exasperated by the evident waiting on events of Bulgaria and the refusal of both Russia and Serbia to make the concessions which might have won her as an Ally. He was, moreover, faced with the fact that any troops which could be spared from the West would from this time forward have to be divided between Salonica and the Dardanelles—to say nothing of Egypt and Mesopotamia.

CHAPTER XLIV

PROBLEMS OF THE COALITION

The Dardanelles Committee and the Cabinet—Proposals for a new organisation—A "fusillade of cross-criticism"—The small War Council—Resignation of Mr. Churchill—Reconstruction of the Imperial General Staff—Appointment of Sir William Robertson—His proposals and modifications—Civilians and experts—Asquith a Westerner—Some inherent difficulties. J. A. S.

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We must now go back a little and consider the situation within the Government during these months. By the beginning of September 1915 the difficulties at the front had caused the usual heart-searchings about the conduct of the war at home. Just as a political party after a defeat at the polls attributes its misfortunes not to an excess in the number of its opponents but to a supposed rottenness in the state of its organisation, so after disappointments and reverses in the field the newspapers and the public concluded not that the enemy had been in superior force but that something was wrong in Downing Street or Whitehall. This inference was drawn on almost all occasions with little or no discrimination, but it was sometimes justified, and in September 1915 Asquith himself was of opinion that the Coalition was on the way to perpetuate and intensify most of the faults that had been imputed to the former Government.

The Dardanelles Committee appointed in the previous June had no doubt served its purpose of giving all parties a say in the operation on which there had been the greatest conflict of opinion, but just in proportion as it fulfilled this function, it had proved a bad instrument for making war. It was much too large; it was highly argumentative, and when it had finished its debates, the Cabinet, as often as not, claimed the right of debating its conclusions all over again from the beginning, with results that were negative or mischievous. Asquith felt a much greater difficulty in closuring these debates than when he had been dealing with his own political friends, and they soon spread from the Dardanelles campaign to the whole field of war. The big Dardanelles Committee and the Cabinet, alternately debating the same subjects and each encroaching on the territory assigned to the other, threatened after three months to become a duplication of the machinery of Government which would make decision even more difficult in war than in peace.

In the last week of September Asquith proposed to abolish the Dardanelles Committee which by this time had developed into an all-round War Council, and to appoint two small Committees, one to deal with the actual conduct of the war and its problems, the other to concern itself with the financial outlook. This, as he records, led to " a fusillade of cross-criticism," and the letters which certain of his colleagues wrote to him in the next few days vividly brought out what everybody knew but what it was not always convenient to avow—that the burning question was in reality not that of the machinery but of the men appointed to work it. Mr. Lloyd George said bluntly that the new scheme would be no better than the old, " unless there was a complete change at the War Office." Mr. Balfour wrote :

Mr. Balfour to Asquith.

" The effective working of such a Committee depends not merely upon its size and general composition but upon the character of the two Ministers at the head of the two War Departments, especially of course upon the character of the Secretary of State for War. Now I have a great liking and admiration for Kitchener, and I think the confidence which the country has had in him has been a national asset of incalculable value. But neither by temperament nor by training is he a good man to work with on such a Committee as you propose. . . . He would inevitably regard the Committee as intended to control him in the exercise of what he conceives to be his proper functions ; and he would deal with it accordingly.

I think this would be true more or less if he were working alone with you and me, who like him, and whom, I think, he likes ; but if, for example, George Curzon and Winston were on the Committee—and they have obvious claims to serve—I think you would find that the internal friction developed by such a machine would seriously interfere with the external work which it was designed to perform.

I always remember what happened on the War Council on which you asked me to serve before the Coalition Government was formed. On it, of course, were the then First Lord of the Admiralty, and the Secretary of State for War—both very strong personalities, with very incompatible temperaments. They would not work with each other, and neither of them would have tolerated for a moment the independent examination by any member of the Committee of experts belonging to their own Departments. To describe that Committee as responsible for the decisions arrived at would be absurd, if ' responsibility ' for a decision is supposed to imply full knowledge and consideration of all the circumstances on which the decision should depend.

I am really inclined to think that we should get on better as we are, with the Cabinet system tempered by occasional and quite informal conversations, such as those which you have now and then arranged for in Downing Street."

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Lord Curzon wrote that the daily or nearly daily meeting of such a body as was proposed would not secure the purpose desired. The Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary, the Secretary for War, the First Lord of the Admiralty, and the Minister of Munitions would have to be members, and it would take them away from their offices for three, or allowing for two Cabinets, five mornings in the week. Moreover, if confined to these Ministers, the Committee would be "little beyond an inter-departmental discussion without the benefit of independent points of view, fresh suggestion or outside experience." He therefore proposed the addition of "at least three other members who should be prepared to devote their whole, or at least the greater part of their time to the problem of the War." Lord Selborne presumed that Mr. Bonar Law would be added as "leader of the late Opposition," and he thought it would be an advantage to bring in Lord Curzon and Mr. Winston Churchill. "Both have ideas, they are both ready critics and neither has an office." Lord Selborne was not sure that it would not be wise also to include Mr. Henderson to represent another party.

The numbers were mounting up, and almost everybody had a nomination. Seeing no possibility of getting his colleagues to agree, Asquith forbore to press his proposals and for two months longer the Dardanelles Committee continued to act as the War Council. Then the Cabinet itself came to the conclusion that there must be a change, and decided (11th November) that the War Council should "consist in the absence of Lord Kitchener (who was then at the Dardanelles) of the Prime Minister, Mr. Balfour, Mr. Lloyd George, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer." This decision was a grievous disappointment to Lord Curzon, and it led Mr. Churchill to resign his position of Chancellor of the Duchy and seek occupation at the front. Its chief disadvantage was that it left the most stubborn of the conflicting personalities face to face with one another; but there was no other way so long as they remained in the Government.

Cabinet discipline went loose in these days, and it became the habit of some of the disputants to communicate their misgivings and discontents to powerful persons outside, who proceeded to ventilate them in the newspapers. In this newspaper warfare the assailants and critics of the Government had an enormous advantage, for Asquith thought it highly unbecoming in war-time, and steadily refused to answer back or even to permit his friends to answer for him when the reply required the disclosure of transactions within the Cabinet. "Non ragionam di lor" was his habitual answer to those who approached him on this subject.

II

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Having decided its own machinery, the Cabinet next took up the question of the military machine. Rumours of trouble between Kitchener and the Cabinet had long been in the air, and a London newspaper got itself suspended by announcing that he was to be superseded, when he started for the Dardanelles at the beginning of November. This was not true, but he had undoubtedly found it less easy to accommodate himself to the Coalition than to its predecessor, and the old objection to the Secretary for War being the sole channel of communication with the Army found many voices.

Asquith had always regretted the disappearance—for any effective purpose—of the Imperial General Staff on the outbreak of war, but the problem of finding men who had sufficient authority to hold their own with the dominant personality at the War Office, or to be taken seriously as an independent organ of military opinion was at the moment beyond solution, and for many months it seemed as if none of that calibre could be spared from the fighting front. But he was more than ready when, in September 1915, the Cabinet, having discussed the subject during one of Lord Kitchener's temporary absences in France, asked him to convey to Lord Kitchener that the time has come for "reconstruction and reinforcement of the General Staff at home." The result was eventually the recall of Sir William Robertson from France and his appointment as Chief of the Imperial General Staff in London.

But this was not till the end of the year, and between the first discussion and the appointment there was a long and sometimes heated debate as to the functions of the General Staff, in which Asquith had once more to use all his arts as a conciliator. The Cabinet had only with reluctance consented to delegate the conduct of the War to a small Committee of its own members, and much as in theory it favoured the idea of a "General Staff," it was not prepared for any large transfer of its responsibilities to a purely military body. On the other hand, Sir William Robertson, whom Asquith had in mind for the position of Chief of the Imperial General Staff, was shrewd enough to see that if his position was to be more than nominal, he must not merely slip into the place vacated by his predecessor, Sir Archibald Murray, but lay down in advance the powers and duties of his office. This he proceeded to do, but in terms which (1) led Lord Kitchener to say that, if they were adopted, they would be tantamount to his supersession, (2) brought immediate questions from the Admiralty as to the part which they would play, 1915 Age 62–3

and (3) put the Cabinet into a state of unrest as to the part which it would play.

In the beginning some of Sir William's proposals appear to have been misunderstood. His desire was to make the War Council a supreme directing authority capable of quick decision, and he was anxious that it should be so composed as to lend itself to that purpose. He wished all advice as to the purely military operations, i.e. the execution of policy, after the policy had been decided to come only from the Chief of the General Staff, and thus to dam up the streams of conflicting and unauthorised opinion which puzzled and confused Ministers. The soundness of these opinions is now generally conceded, and they have for the most part been adopted in the post-war constitution of the Army. But at the time they were novel, and some of them looked arbitrary. It was harder for Kitchener, a military man, to accept a limitation of functions which would have seemed natural to a civilian War Secretary. The distinction between policy and its execution raised objections. The Admiralty wanted to know where it came in, the India Office and the Foreign Office put the same question. Eminent men, fertile in strategy and lively in criticism, suspected that the intention was to exclude them from the supreme direction of the War.

III

Further discussion removed these difficulties and misunderstanding for the time being, and in the end Sir William Robertson and Lord Kitchener came to an understanding which, without dethroning the Secretary of State for War or depriving the Cabinet of its constitutional rights, ensured that all orders for military operations should be issued and signed by the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, " under the authority of the Secretary of State for War and not under that of the Army Council." This made it impossible for the War Committee of the Cabinet, acting through the Secretary of State and the Army Council (a mixed lay and military administrative body), to issue orders which had not been submitted to the General Staff (a wholly expert and military body) and as far as possible removed the danger of conflicting or inconsistent orders. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff was at the same time given direct access to the War Committee, and the old complaint that they were unable to obtain the undiluted military view was now removed. With this Asquith thought the soldiers ought to be content, and we have Sir William Robertson's testimony that " on the whole throughout the year 1916 the General Staff were

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accorded suitable freedom of action in all matters lying within their sphere, and received from the Government as well as from individual Ministers, the guidance and assistance which the proper discharge of their duties required." Sir William adds, "To this fact, perhaps more than to any other, may be largely attributed the military achievements of the year, which left the position in all theatres of war infinitely more satisfactory and hopeful than it had been twelve months before."[1]

Though Asquith had no idea of superseding Kitchener when he left London on his Mediterranean tour, and he would certainly have done nothing of the kind in Kitchener's absence, he was undoubtedly very much troubled at the constant friction between him and certain other members of the Cabinet, and especially Mr. Lloyd George, whose habit of attributing everything that went wrong in the West and in the East to the Secretary for War was not conducive to cool discussion. Apparently at one moment it crossed Asquith's mind that he might calm these troubled waters if he himself took the office of Secretary of War, and combined it with that of Prime Minister, as he had done in 1914; and Mr. Bonar Law, to whom he broached the subject in a confidential talk, seems at first to have approved of it. But after a night's reflection he wrote withdrawing his approval, and strongly expressing the opinion that the Prime Minister should keep his hands free of all departmental duties. Asquith, nevertheless, decided to take charge of the War Office in Kitchener's absence in the Mediterranean, and while he was there, he took certain steps which had momentous consequences up to the end of the War. First he completed the steps for the reconstitution of the Imperial General Staff, and the appointment of Sir William Robertson as its Chief; next he decided that the time had come to change the Commander-in-Chief in France and to substitute Sir Douglas Haig for Sir John French. Asquith seldom laid stress on his own part in any transaction, but he repeated more than once that the substitution of Haig for French was entirely his own act, uninfluenced by any outside pressure. Lord Esher broke the unwelcome news to Sir John, and for the moment he departed in peace, after an exchange of compliments; and took up the Home Command, which was now offered him.[2] The association of Haig and Robertson in the conduct and direction of the War was to prove in after years the strongest guarantee of the concentration on the main theatre which at long last was to show the way to victory.

Asquith has stated his own views on the main issue between

[1] *Soldiers and Statesmen*, p. 286. [2] *Memories and Reflections*, II, pp. 114–115.

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Statesman and Soldier in the chapter on Policy and Strategy in his *Memories and Reflections*.[1] He held any sharp division between policy and strategy to be impossible in practice. There were political emergencies, especially in the Near East, which necessitated departures from the lines which would have been taken on purely strategical ground. The "governing objectives," therefore, had to be decided "after the fullest consultation with their expert advisers, by the ultimate authority—the responsible Ministers at home," but the "execution of them should always be left to the untrammelled discretion of the General Staff and the commanders on the spot." Asquith was willing to advise his colleagues in the Cabinet to accept without debate all decisions on current operations recommended by the General Staff to the War Committee, but he was not willing to fetter their judgment on the choice of the objectives. The line was not always easy to draw, for it was scarcely to be supposed that able and active-minded men, whether soldiers or civilians, would refrain from expressing opinions which lay outside the sphere theoretically assigned to them, but this was the principle on which, so far as he was able, he acted and endeavoured to persuade his colleagues to act, from the beginning of the War until he ceased to be Prime Minister.

The sequel showed that the problem was not solved by the arrangements of December 1915. It worked so long as Asquith was on the scene, and the complete and friendly understanding which was established between Lord Kitchener and Sir William Robertson saved both from the necessity of standing on their rights. Though the contrary has been suggested, it would be difficult to find any military operation during this period which was obstructed or delayed by differences in Whitehall. But no system which could be devised corresponded to all the facts and exigencies of the Great War. The weakness of the military theory of the General Staff was that it presupposed an agreed body of doctrine or expert opinion, which, if followed by civilian Ministers, would lead to military success. There was no such body of doctrine; in all the greater emergencies military opinion was deeply and sometimes evenly divided, and the selection of one group of experts holding one opinion could not prevent another group of experts holding a different opinion from making their voices heard and gaining access to Ministers, politicians, and newspapers. In the Cabinet there was always one distinguished and very active man who avowed his distrust of all the Generals in the field, and was persuaded that, if they had gone to work in a different way, most of the reverses would have been avoided. Whether this would have been so, or whether only a different and possibly worse set of mistakes would have been made could be argued to eternity, but in the meantime it could not be denied that mistakes were being made, and this ardent critic of the soldiers claimed his right to judge by results and complained bitterly when they were not forthcoming. Sir William Robertson's narrative of the later years of the War shows the varying fortunes of this clash of opinion and its effect upon the conduct of the War in the years 1917 and 1918.

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[1] Vol. II, Chap. 15.

Something has already been said about Asquith's view on the central strategical issue. He was a Westerner, but with certain qualifications which he thought necessary in view of the special position of the British Empire. He believed the Dardanelles Expedition to be the one and only Eastern scheme which promised to have any decisive effect upon the course of the War as a whole, and he accepted it in the belief that it was a feasible military and naval operation which could be carried through without imperilling the Western front. But with this one exception he never had the slightest belief in ingenious paper schemes for winning the war by transferring the British army from the West to the East. He abhorred the Salonica expedition, and only consented to it as a lesser evil than quarrelling with the French; and Mesopotamia he considered a very undesirable entanglement, in which an unexpected reverse had to be made good by diverting troops which could ill be spared. It was not the least of Sir William Robertson's merits in Asquith's eyes that he was known to be a staunch Westerner.

IV

Enormous importance was attached at the time to the different patterns in which the civil and military elements in the Government might be arranged. It was said that one way would win, and another would lose the War, and something called "co-ordination" was thought to be the key to victory.

It was indeed immensely important that the numerous campaigns being waged by the different Governments should be brought into some sort of relation, but that could not be achieved by any machinery set up in London. Again and again concerted action between the Allies, perfectly laid out on paper, broke down not for lack of machinery, but because one of the partners would not or could not play the part assigned to it—*would* not because some cherished object of policy stood in the way, *could* not because at the last moment some unexpected move of the enemy had made it impossible to spare the force assigned to that particular purpose. Critics after the event who know the moves of the enemy generally forget that these were the unknown factor in every problem that presented itself to soldiers or civilians at the time. There were other unknown factors almost as conjectural, and not least, the intentions of Russia which for months together were as difficult to ascertain as if she had been fighting against and not with the Allies. Unity of command was effected for a few months between two of the Allies under the extremest pressure of events towards the end of the War, but it was altogether beyond the reach of any Government or the Governments collectively in the earlier years.

Throughout the War Germany presented the nearest approach to the military control of events which the critics of government in this country so often demanded ; and combined with her control over Austria it was undoubtedly an advantage in the conduct of the War. But the overriding of civilian by military opinion led Germany into the two great mistakes which ultimately brought her to disaster ; the invasion of Belgium, which made British intervention certain and immediate, the adoption of the unlimited submarine warfare, which brought the United States into the War against her at a later stage. If the British and Allied systems which left the final decision in the hands of civilian Cabinets was less efficient in war, it was in the end more efficient for victory. Not the least of the services which Asquith rendered was his strong backing of Sir Edward Grey against the weight of military opinion demanding a policy in regard to contraband which, if adopted, would probably have prevented the entry of the United States into the War on the side of the Allies.

. . . .

The last part of 1915 was marked by a domestic event which gave him the greatest satisfaction, namely, the marriage of his daughter Violet to Maurice Bonham Carter. "Bongie," as he was familiarly called, was not only a very old friend of the family, but had for some years been his principal Private Secretary. Probably no man combined so close a professional relationship to Asquith with so close a personal one ; and it was obvious what value he attached to the judgment, the sanity and the humour of his son-in-law, whose self-effacing versatility was requisitioned for the discharge of the most varied and often thankless tasks. Our own debt to him in connexion with this biography is heavy and should be acknowledged here.

CHAPTER XLV

THE COALITION IN TROUBLE

Mr. Lloyd George's attack on Lord Kitchener—Kitchener's reply—The Western Doctrine laid down—Asquith's difficulties—Sir Edward Carson's resignation—Mr. Bonar Law's attitude—Serbia overrun—Lord Kitchener's mission—Some contemporary impressions—Evacuation of the Dardanelles—Derby Scheme and Compulsory Service—First Military Service Bill—Resignation of Sir John Simon—Finance and man power—A Cabinet crisis—Threatened resignations—Stock-taking. J. A. S.

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Towards the end of September 1915 Mr. Lloyd George delivered a broadside at Lord Kitchener in a memorandum addressed to the Cabinet and in a covering letter to the Prime Minister. The Minister of Munitions, as he now was, observed in this covering letter that the small Committee which was now proposed for the conduct of the War would undoubtedly be an improvement on "the sort of Duma" which had hitherto been sitting, but that "unless there was a complete change at the War Office" the new Council would be "just as impotent as the Cabinet and the old Council had proved themselves to be." He went back on the story of the shells and charged the War Office with having by its neglect and its "incredible lack of foresight" lost the campaign of 1915. He surveyed the position in the Balkans and declared that by "prompt action" Rumania, Greece, and Bulgaria could have been brought in, and a million and a half added to our reserves of men, while the enemy could have been cut off from the "magnificent reservoir of men in the Turkish Empire who were only waiting equipment to become one of the most formidable fighting machines in the world." We had been warned that the Germans were likely to break through to Constantinople, yet nothing was done; even when information came in that the Germans and Austrians were accumulating forces in the valleys of Hungary and the Bukovina no plan of action was thought of. A fortnight after it had been reported that they had crossed the Danube, Kitchener's only plan was to send a General to the Mediterranean to report on the situation. Days after the road to Constantinople had been cleared, and weeks after the actual commencement of the struggle upon which the fate of our Empire

1915 Age 63 in Egypt and Persia might depend, we had been forced by the French to take some action (i.e. to send troops to Salonica). Mr. Lloyd George looked ahead to the political situation which might follow when the delusions about the War Office were shattered and "the capacity of our great war lords for blundering" was disclosed and our state of unpreparedness in the Balkans became known. "The steadfast loyalty of our party to your leadership," he said finally to Asquith, "has so far saved the Government, but you will forgive me for saying that I doubt whether that would save us if a catastrophe befell Serbia or our forces in the Dardanelles, and all the facts on the conduct of the War were dragged out, as they would be." There was only one answer that would satisfy the public and that was that the Prime Minister had made an end of "the futile régime that tumbled along from one fatuity to another"; and he had very reluctantly come to the conclusion that he could no longer be responsible for the "present war direction."

The memorandum to the Cabinet developed the same theme and definitely proposed that a promise should be made to Serbia, Greece, and Rumania to put 250,000 men into the Balkan field before the end of the year, and that for this purpose the projected offensive in the West should be postponed. Mr. Lloyd George drew a vivid picture of Greece and Rumania rallying to the Allies under this inducement, of Russia landing 100,000 men, and an Allied force mounting towards a million, disposing of Bulgarians and Germans (whom he asserted to be not more than 500,000 strong) while the army in the Dardanelles contained the Turks. In the memorandum, as in the letter, he reminded his colleagues of the warnings he had repeatedly given them on the situation in the Balkans, and admonished them of the wrath to come. "When it becomes clear to the British public that we have been taken by surprise and that we have not made the slightest preparation to counter the German thrust, confidence will vanish in our capacity to conduct the War, and rightly so."

On the margin on his copy of the memorandum Asquith has written against this passage: "All these so-called warnings were based on the assumption that Bulgaria, Greece, and probably Rumania could be brought in to support Serbia. It is largely Serbia's fault that this has been found impossible." But he left the answer to Kitchener, who issued another memorandum to the Cabinet within the next few days. He too, he pointed out, had laid stress on the extreme desirability of bringing Bulgaria in, but protracted negotiations had led to no result. We had done our utmost to clear up the situation in the Dardanelles, and enable our troops to leave the Peninsula safely, but so far without success, and the situation in France prevented us from taking further measures in the Near East at the moment. "It is often forgotten," said Kitchener, "that we started with only six Divisions to take part in this stupendous struggle. New Divisions have been trained, equipped, and despatched to the front with the greatest possible speed, but the rate of increase of the army has never been able to keep pace with the demands made upon it." Kitchener then laid down the central doctrine of the Western school:

> "With a powerful enemy working on interior lines, it is extremely dangerous, without the gravest consideration of the consequences that may ensue, to move troops by long sea routes, in the course of which they are not available for active operations in order to parry possible attacks that might be made by the enemy.
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> It should also be remembered that such operations as are now being carried on by the Austro-German forces in Serbia, would not prevent the possibility of their delivering us a severe blow in a theatre of war where the results might be fatal to the future conduct of the campaign, and imperil the safety of the French ports."

These general principles were warmly supported during the coming week by Sir William Robertson from Headquarters in France, who on 6th November sent Asquith a long memorandum reviewing the whole situation East and West, and pointing out the dangers of any heavy commitments at Salonica.[1] This also was circulated to the Cabinet.

II

Asquith was now in a position of extreme difficulty. The French having forced the situation by sending troops to Salonica without consulting the British Cabinet, were daily demanding that it should follow their lead, and at the same time protesting that no troops could be spared from the Western front. Mr. Lloyd George was threatening resignation unless the whole direction of the War was altered, the plans laid for the offensive in France postponed, and large forces transferred from France for the reinforcement of the Salonica enterprise and the rescue of Serbia.[2] Military opinion was all but unanimous that this enterprise could have none of the results

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[1] *Soldiers and Statesmen*, I, p. 196 *et seq.*

[2] Mr. Churchill had capped this by proposing that there should be three enterprises running simultaneously: (1) the Dardanelles under the command of Lord French; (2) the Balkan Expedition under the command of a French General; and (3) the Western front with greatly reduced forces under the command of Lord Kitchener. Letter to Asquith, 14th October, 1915.

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expected from it; and the main assumptions on which it was based, the support of Rumania and Greece, were visibly failing. Rumania showed no signs of moving, and in Greece Venizelos had fallen, and King Constantine had swung a considerable number of his people over to a neutrality which looked far from benevolent, and left the Allies whom Venizelos had invited into the country in the position of unwanted guests, if not actual trespassers. All through these troubles, the Cabinet was deeply divided on the question whether the Dardanelles should be evacuated, and in grave doubt whether evacuation, if decided on, could be carried out without serious losses. In October Sir Edward Carson resigned on the ground that the Cabinet's objection to sending large forces to Salonica involved the desertion of Serbia, and Mr. Bonar Law was every day saying or writing to Asquith that he too would resign unless the decision were taken at once to evacuate Gallipoli.[1]

In the circumstances as they had now got tangled up between French and British Governments there was no good policy; the only question was how to choose the least bad. To the end Asquith maintained that the sending of troops to Salonica was strategically bad, though politically irresistible in view of the demands of the French. Before judgment is passed, the stress of these days must be recalled—the great expedition locked up in Gallipoli, and no one knowing how far the order to evacuate might not be a sentence of doom; Kitchener pacing his room by night, and, as he told Asquith, "seeing the boats fired at and capsizing, and the drowning men"; all the Indian and Egyptian experts and ex-officials assuring the Government that the acknowledgment of failure in the Dardanelles would be a shattering blow to British prestige, leading surely to the invasion of Egypt, and quite probably to large enterprises by Turks and Germans shaking the whole East up to the gates of India; the French Government suddenly changing its ground between demands for every available man on the Western front and extreme pressure for British adhesion to the Salonica expedition.[2] At the end of October the Cabinet decided to send Kitchener to the Dardanelles to see for himself and to report to his colleagues. This was neither the temporising measure that some thought it, nor the intrigue to get him off the scene that the malicious hinted, but the necessary preliminary to convincing him and other members of the

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[1] *Field-Marshal Sir Henry Wilson*, I, pp. 261–262.

[2] See Sir William Robertson's *Soldiers and Statesmen*, II, Chap. X. General Joffre, till then the staunchest of French Westerners, came to London on 29th October, and threatened to resign his position as Commander-in-Chief of the French Armies unless British co-operation in the Salonica expedition were sanctioned.

Government who shrank from a decision on the knowledge then available. Nor was the order to keep the evacuated troops in Egypt pending the decision of their ultimate destination open to the criticism that was afterwards passed on it. It was mere prudence to keep them there until at least it was known whether the evacuation would have the consequences—invasion of Egypt, turmoil in the Farther East—which Kitchener and other Eastern experts expected from it. The truth was, as afterwards appeared, that the Dardanelles expedition had so shattered the military power of the Turks as to render them incapable of these ambitious projects, and the Germans had other schemes in preparation which they thought more likely to break the resistance of their principal enemies. But this was not known in November and December 1915.

After the fall of M. Venizelos and the refusal of King Constantine to enter the War on the side of the Allies, the British General Staff was more than ever of opinion that the Salonica expedition could serve neither its original purpose of relieving Serbia nor any other that was worth the effort that it entailed. The soldiers viewed the scene very much as a chess-player might who was called upon to sacrifice certain pieces in his general scheme of attack or defence, and they had little patience with civilian critics who cried out at these incidents as irreparable catastrophes or betrayals. But the spectacle which now followed of Serbia being overrun and her army chased into the mountains of Albania made a painful impression on the public, and enabled the Easterners to say more loudly than ever that if their advice had been listened to, this catastrophe would have been avoided. If the Cabinet survived this load of trouble, it was probably because the multiplicity of its opinions on the claims of the Dardanelles, Salonica, and the Western front prevented the formation of any one powerful dissentient group. After Sir Edward Carson's resignation, Mr. Lloyd George was the only whole-hearted supporter of the Balkan enterprise whose views were of importance. In the third week of November Kitchener telegraphed from Mudros conveying the "considered opinion" of practically all the naval and military officers on the spot that Gallipoli should be evacuated. This was especially the view of Sir Charles Munro, who by this time had succeeded Sir Ian Hamilton in the Mediterranean command. On his return home at the end of November, Kitchener strongly enforced this advice upon his colleagues, who accepted it but declined to sanction the landing at Alexandretta (Ayas Bay) which he recommended as a set-off to the evacuation of Gallipoli. The general opinion at this moment

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was decidedly against side-shows in the East. Salonica was inevitable and it was judged to be more than enough.

Asquith was only a reluctant convert to the necessity of evacuating Gallipoli, but the weight of military and naval opinion was overwhelming, and he bowed to it.

III

Though they have been printed before, certain passages in *Memories and Reflections* belonging to this time may find a place here. They show that the load of trouble did not altogether quench Asquith's spirits or his sense of humour:

> November 22. After I had put in a short time at the House. I went to the War Office, where I had a succession of rather interesting (and exacting) interviews: (1) with Sir Douglas Haig, who was as usual somewhat tongue-tied, but sooner or later got to the point; (2) with Sir H. Smith-Dorrien, who is disposed to be obsessed with his grievance against Sir J. French. We have given him (S.-D.) the East African Command, with Tighe and Bridges as his major-generals, and he is so happy not to be *désœuvré* that I think he will take on the new job *con amore*; (3) with Von Donop, to whom I had to make the revelation that two or three of the remaining leaves of his attenuated artichoke are to be snapped off by Lloyd George. I handled him as well as I could, and, I hope, broke his fall.
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> November 27. As K. threatens to return on Tuesday morning I seem to be drawing to an end of my double life—for the present at any rate. Redmond came to the War Office to see me, to recount his experiences at the Front, and his hopes and fears. He is rather strongly pro-French,[1] and anti-Haig; full also of the super-eminent virtues and claims of Sir William Robertson.
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> December 5. We (i.e. self, A.J.B., and K., with a whole retinue of generals and experts) left Charing Cross about 10.30 in the morning and crossed from Dover in the destroyer *Zulu* under fair weather conditions to Calais, where we arrived about 1, and were greeted by the French—Briand, Joffre, Gallieni, etc. etc. We lunched together in more or less gloomy silence, and then proceeded to our conference. I was asked by Briand to preside, and without much preamble called upon K. to expound our view of the military situation at Salonica, and the need of prompt evacuation. Briand at once replied in one of the ablest and most brilliant speeches I have ever heard, dwelling on the political and diplomatic troubles incident to such a course. A.J.B. made a very clever reply in moderate but intelligible French. Remaining silent myself, but watching the situation narrowly (while Gallieni and Joffre made their contributions), I soon came to the conclusion that if we stuck to our guns we should not only hold our own, but the French would on the whole feel relieved. So I turned on K. again, who played his part of sullen, morose, rather suspicious, but wholly determined man, with good effect. Then I asked the

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[1] Sir John French.

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French to retire for a few minutes and we drew up, in such French as we could command, our conclusions. They acquiesced with some show of reluctance and regret, and we parted ostensibly—and I think really—on excellent terms.

Soon after six we started back home on our destroyer on one of the foulest nights I have ever seen. We took two and a half hours to cross the Channel with a head wind, dirty and continuous rain, and pitch black darkness. Everyone except K. and myself was sick and miserable—in particular A.J.B. I said to him when at last we reached Dover, "Well, at any rate we have not been mined or torpedoed." To which he replied, "I wished to God we had!"

December 6, 1915. The French are once more in full cry for the retention of Salonica.

December 22. I knew that you would sympathise with me in the intense relief of knowing the almost incredible, and indeed miraculous, methods and results of the evacuation at Suvla and Anzac. It has been for the last two weeks a veritable nightmare. And, as you say, what a commentary on expert advice! Even K., who discounted the extreme view of our potential loss—not less than 30, and probably more than 50 per cent—was very pessimistic.[1] Not a single life lost, only six guns left behind and all those destroyed, with a few hospital tents and the remnants of stores, which were shelled and burnt by the Navy at daylight. It is the most wonderful retirement in war history, far surpassing even Sir John Moore's at Corunna.

Monro[2] is now pressing for the evacuation of Helles also, before the middle of January, when the weather for two months becomes increasingly bad. Personally, of course, I should be more than delighted.

As an illustration of the hazards of war, we had this morning a telegram from the Admiral (Wemyss), who has done extraordinarily well, to report that the wind had suddenly changed and was blowing a south-west gale. If this had happened twenty-four hours sooner, the whole thing might have been frustrated, and perhaps turned into a gigantic disaster. It is, I think, almost the first blow which Providence has struck in our favour since the War began.

December 22. The moment that one emerges from one crisis one is engulfed in another. The Cabinet met to consider for the first time the Derby Report. The impression left upon me is profoundly disquieting.

The discussion unhappily followed party lines (Lloyd George and Henderson were away) and to judge from to-day's experience we seem to be on the brink of a precipice. The practical question is—Shall I be able during the next ten days to devise and build a bridge?

. . . .

Another good story from the Front which I heard was of some English Tommies, foraging in France, who had succeeded in getting two or three *lapins*.

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[1] Lord Curzon circulated a Memorandum, of which I cannot find a copy, which drew a lurid prophetic picture founded on the 6th and 7th Books of Thucydides.

[2] General Sir C. Monro, who had been sent from France to the Dardanelles to report on the situation there. His advice was acted on—with the best results.

The peasant asked them what they were going to do with their spoil. Answer (from a Berlitz-instructed Tommy): "Pour faire la messe." Peasant: "Quelle drôle de réligion!" (*Memories and Reflections*, Vol. II, pp. 110–113.)

IV

The skilful and successful evacuation of the Dardanelles in the third week of December was an enormous relief which eased the tension in the Cabinet about the conduct of the War. But, as the above quotation shows, it was by no means the end of trouble for the Prime Minister. By this time a storm was blowing up from another quarter, and in the last days of December Asquith found himself in the throes of a new and unexpected crisis. The trouble now was about military service and the new questions arising out of it, in regard to the financing of the War and the division of man-power between the fighting front and the home front.

From quite early days in the Coalition, certain Ministers—especially Lord Curzon, Mr. Lloyd George, and Mr. Churchill—had been pressing for compulsory military service against the steady resistance of other members of the Cabinet. The division was by no means on party lines, but it added sensibly to the clash of temperaments and dispositions within the Coalition. Asquith, though a staunch upholder of voluntary service in time of peace, considered compulsion in war-time to be purely a matter of expediency, and he was ready to act as soon as the necessity was proved. But to act in advance of a necessity which could be made clear to the public he considered both unwise and dangerous, having regard to the traditional sentiment of large numbers of people and the stubborn hostility of organised Labour. In this he was warmly backed by Kitchener, who up to the autumn of 1915 professed himself well content with the result of voluntary enlistment. But from that time onwards the question of man-power became more urgent, and Asquith agreed that the success or failure of the Derby scheme of recruiting which was launched in October should be accepted as the decisive test of whether compulsion was necessary or not. The details of this will be related in the subsequent chapter, and it is sufficient to say here that before December was far advanced the Derby scheme was deemed to have failed and the Cabinet decided to go forward with compulsion. This led to the resignation of the Attorney-General, Sir John Simon, who both objected on principle to compulsory service and thought the necessity for it to be unproven. But apart from the principle of compulsion, the measure now to be proposed raised highly important questions of finance and the application of man-power on which Mr. McKenna, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Runciman, the President of the Board of Trade, held strong views, and Sir Edward Grey was, on the whole, in sympathy with them.

In the opinion of these Ministers the winning of the War depended scarcely less, if at all less, on the right distribution of resources of men and money between supplying army and navy with men and munitions, maintaining the civil population, and providing for the demands of Allies than upon military operations in the field. They saw the Departments spending blindly with little regard for each other or the aggregate resources of the country, the Army making demands for men which threatened the necessary industries and even its own supply of munitions, and the Government making promises to the Allies which, when the time came, it might be unable to fulfil. To cut the coat according to the cloth, to ascertain the limits of possible effort, and to give the Allies a clear intimation of what this country could do and what it could not do, was, in their view, far better than to risk catastrophe by promising the impossible and failing to perform it. To maintain seventy Divisions in the field all through the coming year as the General Staff demanded was, Mr. McKenna held, impossible from a financial point of view, and, Mr. Runciman argued, incompatible with the maintenance of essential industries. The seventy Divisions would need an immediate enlistment of 300,000 men, and 32,000 a week for its maintenance, whereas 20,000 a week was the utmost that these industries could spare.

The soldiers' reply, in effect, was that, if that were so, the hope of conquering the enemy must be abandoned and any terms accepted that could be obtained when the limit was reached. Mr. Lloyd George, Lord Curzon, and Mr. Austen Chamberlain were hot for the seventy Divisions, the figure on which the War Office had for weeks been working with the knowledge of the Cabinet, and sharply challenged the estimate of the Treasury that another year of war would bring the accumulated deficit to £2,000,000,000, and that this would be the utmost burden that the country could bear. On the 29th Mr. McKenna's resignation and that of Mr. Runciman seemed imminent, and Sir Edward Grey wrote to Asquith that if they went, he would go too, though for somewhat different reasons. "I have always felt," he said, "that I ought to have left the Cabinet when Haldane went in May, and his continued exclusion when new vacancies occur will make the concession to ignorant and malignant clamour still more marked and injurious to the public service." He

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had remained in May because it had been represented to him that his stay at the Foreign Office was then indispensable for public opinion both at home and abroad, but that was no longer the case, and there were even reasons why there should be changes at the Foreign Office. In any case the withdrawal of Ministers "with whom he was on terms of friendship, and with one intimately so," made him feel that the time had come for his resignation.

There could scarcely have been a heavier blow to Asquith at a more inopportune moment. He had with difficulty persuaded Kitchener to remain in the Government when he returned from the Mediterranean; he had just managed to placate Mr. Lloyd George and Mr. Bonar Law on the Salonica expedition and the evacuation of Gallipoli, and now he was threatened with the secession of three Ministers who were among his most intimate friends and supporters. He parried the blow with an appeal to Sir Edward Grey to stand by him and play the part of conciliator, and in response Sir Edward was able to report (30th December) that Mr. McKenna and Mr. Runciman would attend the next day's Cabinet and put their case. This they did, and a lively debate followed in which all parties put their case with the candour which the situation demanded. The "differences of opinion were very acute," was Asquith's report to the King, "but at the end at Mr. Balfour's suggestion it was referred to the Prime Minister, Mr. McKenna, and Mr. Chamberlain to report after immediate conference with the Treasury and General Staff." If it had not presented itself in this dangerous form, Asquith would by no means have objected to the *démarche* of his three colleagues, for he too was extremely uneasy about the state of finance, and shared the Treasury view of the uncontrolled spending of the Army and the Departments. The scrutiny which followed was of real advantage, and he cheerfully took upon himself the labour that it involved. But when the year ended, he was more than ever conscious of the difficulties of driving his composite team and finding the common denominator between their highly intelligent, perfectly legitimate, but unfortunately conflicting, opinions on the immensely complicated and difficult questions with which they had to deal.

CHAPTER XLVI

COMPULSORY SERVICE

Verdun and the Somme—The Salonica cross-current—Asquith's stipulation—Failure of the Derby Scheme and Compulsory Service—The pledge to the married men—Its redemption—Resignation of Labour Ministers—Its withdrawal—Grievances and attacks on the system—Various proposals—Ministerial dissensions—Another Bill and its withdrawal—Newspaper agitations—Lord Robert Cecil's suggestion—Asquith's views on Compulsory Service—A letter from the King. J. A. S.

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ALTHOUGH at the beginning of 1916 the Government found itself committed to the Salonica expedition, and the ill-starred but minor operation which ended in the surrender of Kut was in progress in Mesopotamia, the main strategical controversy settled itself for the greater part of this year. The fierce German attack on Verdun which began in February and lasted till June confirmed the prevailing military view that the army on the Western front could not be depleted without the most serious risk, and the idea of maintaining the defensive on that front with a diminished army had for the time being no friends in the Government. The lesson was reinforced later in the year on the eastern front, where Austrians and Germans suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of the Russian General Brusiloff through having weakened their lines south of the Pripet in order to undertake an offensive against Italy. Evidently it would not do for any of the belligerents to assume that a quiescent enemy would remain inactive, if he saw his chance of a successful attack.

The Cabinet, then, had good grounds for congratulating itself that it had stood firm against any commitments in the East beyond sending the promised number of troops to Salonica when the Dardanelles had been evacuated. From February to June, as the attack on Verdun developed, the French called more and more loudly to us for some move to relieve the pressure on them, and serious complaints went up at the slowness of our response.[1] We poured troops into France as fast as they were ready, extended our line and took over the Arras front from the French, but it was not till the end of June that the moment came to launch the attack on the Somme which was to draw the Germans from Verdun and drain their military strength more than any other great operation in the War. The Easterners still said below their breath that the French should have yielded Verdun and released the British reinforcements for more fruitful operations on another front, but the French insisted that Verdun was vital to them, that their country was in imminent danger, and that it was our part to attack while they stood firm against attack.

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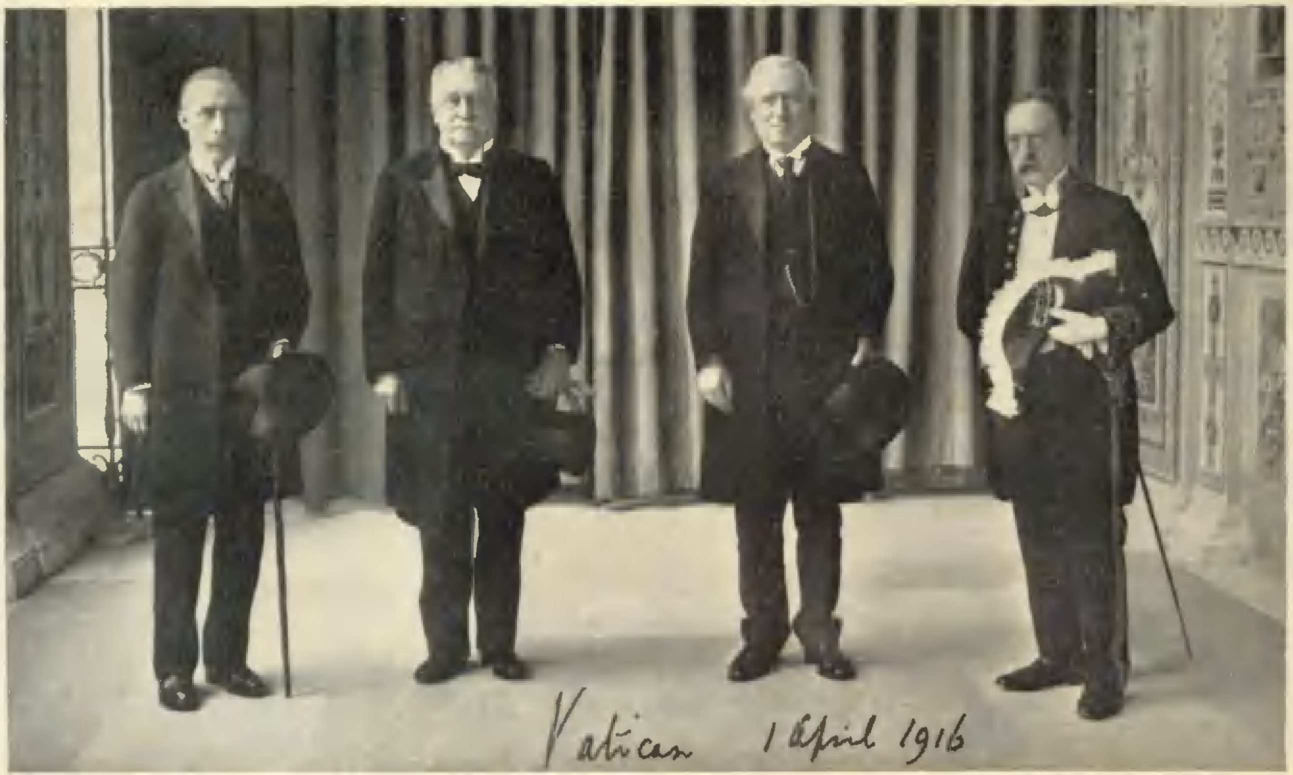
[1] General Joffre himself had fixed the date for the British offensive, but this apparently was unknown at the time to the French press and public.

Any other answer than a promise to attack at the earliest moment on the biggest scale possible would have strained the alliance to the breaking-point, and for the first nine months of this year, War Council, General Staff, and Cabinet worked harmoniously together for an agreed objective. The only cross-current was the unceasing and, as it seemed to British Ministers, most unseasonable demand of General Sarrail to be allowed to undertake an offensive from Salonica, and against this they stood firm even at the risk of giving offence to the General's political friends in France. The French had once more to be reminded that they could not at one and the same time declare it to be an imperative necessity that we should send every man to France and ask us to find troops for formidable operations elsewhere. But for reasons little understood in this country the Salonica expedition had come to be regarded by large numbers of Frenchmen as standing outside the logic of events elsewhere, and Cambon begged Sir Edward Grey to soften the language in which the Cabinet proposed to communicate its decisions, lest offence should be given in important quarters. There was no difficulty about this, but Asquith was firm that General Sarrail should not start an offensive without British consent, and he paid many visits to France in order to impress this view on French politicians and soldiers.

II

But if strategy for the time being ceased to trouble, the Cabinet had other grave difficulties in front of it, and first in order at the beginning of the year came the stubborn question of compulsory military service, which had now to be grappled with and settled.

The decision of Ministers following on the failure of the Derby recruiting scheme to accept the principle of compulsion has been briefly recorded in the previous chapter, but this by no means disposed of the question, and its developments during the first few weeks of the New Year came very near to wrecking the Government



Vatican 1 April 1916

COL. O'BEIRNE AND H. H. A. AT THE VATICAN, 1st APRIL, 1916

and once more placed Asquith in a position of extreme difficulty between his old colleagues and his new.

The appeal for recruits launched by Lord Derby in October 1915 had been to men of all military ages, married and unmarried, but attached to it was a pledge given by Asquith on behalf of the Government that married men would not be called up until the young unmarried men had been brought in; and that if all but a negligible number of the latter did not come forward voluntarily, either the married men would be released or a Bill would be introduced into Parliament compelling the young men to serve. When the figures were known, the Cabinet was all but unanimous that the number of unattested young men (about 650,000) was not negligible, and that since the married men could not be dispensed with, the pledge must be fulfilled by the introduction of a Bill compelling the young men to come in.

Asquith himself had no doubt on this point, and he at once gave notice of his intention to introduce such a Bill. But intimations came to him from all quarters that serious opposition was to be expected. Organised Labour was, as Mr. Smillie said, "against conscription, root and branch," and fears were expressed by those in a position to know that serious labour trouble would follow the introduction of the Bill. Liberal members of Parliament, while ready to accept any assurance of the necessity of this measure which Asquith might give them, had watched with suspicion the furious campaign for compulsion which the Northcliffe press had conducted during the Derby recruiting, and attributed its failure not a little to that agitation. Two suspicions had to be disarmed: the suspicion that Unionist politicians who were known to be advocates of conscription in peace-time were using the War to foist this system on to the country in permanence; the suspicion widely entertained by workmen that military conscription would be followed by industrial or at least be so used as to be in effect industrial. The famous coup of M. Briand, who extinguished a railway strike by converting the railwaymen into soldiers under military discipline with a stroke of his pen, was often recalled in these days, and British workers were exhorted to beware of it.

If the Bill passed with comparatively little opposition (27th January) it was mainly by Asquith's personal influence and exertion. Opponents who would have held out against any other kind of blandishment were willing to accept his word that the Bill was a necessity. His pledge that it would not be permanent, his assurance that it would not be extended to the industrial sphere, and

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his evident desire to deal fairly with the conscientious objector weighed at this moment more than all other appeals, however eloquent. But he had great difficulties behind the scenes. On 10th January in the middle of the debate on the Bill in the House of Commons he was faced with the resignation of Mr. Arthur Henderson, the Labour member of the Cabinet, and Mr. Brace and Mr. Roberts, the two other Labour Ministers. All three expressed their deep regret at being compelled to embarrass him at such a moment, but explained that the decision of the Executive of their party left them no option. He persuaded them to hold their resignations in suspense, and two days later Mr. Henderson was able to tell the House of Commons that he had received assurances from both Asquith and Kitchener which enabled him and his colleagues to remain in the Government. The Labour party nevertheless adhered to its view, and at its conference in January "protested emphatically against the adoption of conscription in any form, as it is against the spirit of British democracy and full of danger to the liberties of the people." Sir John Simon too persisted in his resignation.

III

So far the Government had come better out of it than Asquith had expected. But the new Act had no sooner come into operation than it became the target of criticism from both sides. In a debate on the last day of February, Sir John Simon complained that the local tribunals were not administering it fairly: that the young men who were the sole support of their mothers were not being exempted, as the Act intended; that, in spite of the assurances of the War Office, men exempted on the ground that they were indispensable in civil occupations were being bluffed into attesting; that medical certificates were being torn up by recruiting officers, and in some cases had not been delivered at all. On the other hand, the tribunals were attacked for giving exemptions much too freely, and it was alleged that the stars and badges for munitions work and reserved occupations were becoming the refuge of shirkers. Finally it was said that the pledge to the married men was not even now being carried out, and Lord Kitchener himself was obliged to admit that owing to the extensions of time granted for the tribunals, it had been found necessary to call up the younger married groups earlier than had been expected.

Agitation on these subjects raged furiously in the Press, and was reflected in Parliament and in the Cabinet. The weaknesses

H. H. A. WITH LORD SHEFFIELD AT ALDERLEY, 1916

of Coalition Government were now more than ever revealed. Following the example of the Labour Party, the Unionist Party began to put pressure on Unionists in the Cabinet to stand out for general compulsion, and Liberals retorted by exerting pressure in the opposite direction. The Cabinet meanwhile had appointed a Committee of four, consisting of the Prime Minister, Mr. McKenna, Lord Lansdowne, and Mr. Austen Chamberlain, to go into the whole subject and report on the best way of remedying grievances and straightening out the tangle. The four proposed (14th April) to extend compulsion to all who had reached the age of eighteen since 15th August, 1915, or all who might reach that age hereafter, to retain with the Colours all time-expired Regulars and Territorials, and to make a further effort to "comb out" single men in munitions factories and reserved occupations, and in general to persist in all existing methods of enrolment. The Cabinet refused to accept these proposals, and for the next fortnight was in a state of distraction. Twice Asquith was obliged to ask for a postponement of the statement which he had promised to make to the House, and on the second occasion (19th April) he made a perfectly frank disclosure of internal dissensions : 1916 Age 63

> There are still, I regret to say, material points of disagreement in the Cabinet, and if these points cannot be settled by agreement, the result must be the break-up of the Government. The Cabinet is united in believing that such an event would be a national disaster of the most formidable kind, and it is in the hope that it may be averted by a few days more of deliberation that I shall propose that the House adjourn to-day till Tuesday next (April 25).

A fragment of dialogue has come down from the Cabinet held on the morning of the day on which this communication was made to the House :

> Asquith : "What am I to say in the House of Commons at 3.45 this afternoon ?"
> Mr. Balfour : "That the British Constitution is bankrupt, that we have broken down and are unfit to conduct the War, and that we tell the Allies to make the best peace they can as soon as they can ?"
> Asquith : "Am I to say that ?"
> A Unionist Minister : "The Unionist and Liberal parties ought to be told the situation and asked their views."
> Asquith : "That would be the abdication of all government."

Nothing but the strongest conviction that a break-up of the Government on this question would be an irreparable disaster to the Allied cause carried Asquith through the following weeks or steeled him to

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put up with the buffets and mortifications that they brought with them.

On 25th April and again on the 26th the House met in Secret Session and debated the whole subject of recruiting. On 27th April in open session Mr. Long introduced a Bill which proposed to extend the service of time-expired men and to bring youths on reaching the age of eighteen under the Military Service Act. This proposal was the result of a complicated struggle on the ground of expediency, and meant that Ministers collectively shrank from giving the military authorities unlimited power of withdrawing labour from civil employment.[1] But it ran counter to the strong popular sentiment which judged it to be harsh and unfair to retain the time-expired men—the veterans and the twice-wounded—with the Colours, unless it was absolutely certain that no others were available; and it was so hotly assailed on this and other grounds that Asquith decided to withdraw it. Five days later (2nd May) Asquith announced the intention of the Government to proceed to general and immediate compulsion extending to all male British subjects, married as well as single, between the ages of eighteen and forty-one. A Bill to this effect was introduced the following day and carried through both Houses by 25th May.

The tension while this situation developed was extraordinary. Rumours—not far from the truth—that Asquith was on the point of resigning filled Liberal members with dismay, and the vast majority of them joined in a resolution passed at a meeting held in the House of Commons on 17th April:

> "We desire to express to the Prime Minister our conviction that his continuance at the head of the Government is a national necessity."

On the other side the Unionists, led by Sir Edward Carson and Lord Milner, were equally urgent that the members of their party should stand firm, and a little Liberal group calling itself "the Liberal War Committee"—the germ of the Coalition Liberals of later days—were, if possible, even more zealous in the same sense. Between all these groups and the newspapers backing them information flowed freely about the course of events in the Cabinet, which might almost have been holding its sittings in public in these days. So great was the scandal of these disclosures that in the following month the Government obtained parliamentary sanction for an Order-in-Council prohibiting the publication of Cabinet secrets. The pertinent question was asked whether the penalties attaching to publication applied to the Minister who disclosed as well as to the newspaper which published these secrets, but the question whether penalties were enforceable against either remained untested up to the end of the War.

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[1] Asquith observed that Ministers who were anxious that compulsion should be applied to other Departments nearly all had reserves about their own Departments. One Minister especially who was hot for general compulsion greatly amused him by the zeal with which he insisted on the necessity for exemptions in his own Department.

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IV

After the withdrawal of the Government's National Service Bill on 27th April Lord Robert Cecil submitted a note to certain of his colleagues proposing that the Government should resign with a view to "reconstruction" on a surer foundation. "As far as I can see," he said, "the only possible Prime Minister would be Mr. Asquith. The Government, however, would be reconstructed on a different basis. It would be no longer a Coalition but a National Government. Its members would be selected not because certain parliamentary interests must be placated but because these members were the best persons available to fill the offices for which they were chosen." Lord Robert undoubtedly placed his finger on the chief weakness of the Coalition. It had been compelled on almost every question to harmonise views held by party men who regarded themselves as trustees of their parties, and were constantly looking over their shoulders to see whether they could carry their parties with them. "I believe," said Mr. Bonar Law in a letter to Asquith in the course of the discussion on military service, "that it is easier for you to obtain the consent of your party to general compulsion than for me to obtain the consent of my party to its not being adopted," and the observation is the key to much of the trouble that beset the Coalition in these days and later. Mr. Bonar Law was willing to make many concessions for the sake of agreement, but he was always quite frank on the point that there were certain things which he could not do, even though he himself approved of them, if his party disapproved. He was in that sense the leader of his party in the Coalition, and in that respect he had the advantage over Asquith who, as leader of the Coalition, felt it his duty to detach himself as far as possible from the Liberal Party view.

On the particular question of compulsory service Asquith was not at all averse in the end to general compulsion. What was important in his mind was to obtain the "general consent" to a proved necessity; and though they looked blundering to the public and were undoubtedly mortifying to him personally, he accepted these final

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stages as part of the process of establishing the "general consent" by exhausting the alternatives. The time for general compulsion was when it was clear that the Army was bound to have the men, and each possible alternative had been rejected equally by the advocates and by the opponents of compulsion.

He had never, as he says in *Memories and Reflections*, had a harder task in public life than the steering of this measure through the Cabinet and through Parliament. But he was encouraged in the middle of it by a letter from the King, which though it has already been published in his own book must find a place here :

The King to Asquith.

BUCKINGHAM PALACE,
April 20th, 1916.

MY DEAR PRIME MINISTER,

It is with the greatest satisfaction that I learn from the letter to Bigge of the happy agreement arrived at by the Cabinet to-day. I do most heartily congratulate you on having by your patience and skill extricated the Country from a position the dangers of which it was impossible to overestimate.

I do indeed trust that this solution will prove final and that your Coalition Government, once more united, will gain renewed strength and greater confidence of the Country, to enable you to prosecute with the fullest energy the continuance of the War to a victorious end. During the last six years you and I have passed through some strenuous and critical times and once again, thank God, we have "weathered the storm!" I am so glad to hear that the matter will be submitted at a secret session in each House on Tuesday next. In expressing my relief at the termination of the crisis, I wish again to assure you of my complete confidence in my Prime Minister.

Believe me,
Very sincerely yours,
GEORGE, R.I.

The King, as it turned out, was a little too sanguine about the immediate results in Parliament, but neither King nor Prime Minister was dissatisfied with the final result.

CHAPTER XLVII

THE IRISH REBELLION

The Irish Rebellion—Mr. Birrell's resignation—Asquith's visit to Ireland—The need of an Irish settlement—Negotiations with the Irish—Unionist opposition—A battle in the Cabinet—Asquith's appeal to his colleagues—Views of Lord Lansdowne and Mr. Walter Long—Lord Lansdowne's speech and its results—Failure of the scheme—Mistakes and difficulties in Ireland—The Paris Economic Conference.
J. A. S.

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Overlapping the controversy about compulsory service and largely influencing the moods and emotions of Ministers was another question which also seriously threatened the unity of the Government. During the night of 20th April an attempt was made by a German auxiliary disguised as a neutral merchant ship, attended by a German submarine, to land arms in Ireland. The ship was sunk and a number of prisoners were taken, including Sir Roger Casement, who had already made himself notorious by his endeavours to seduce Irishmen in German prison camps from their allegiance to the British Crown. Four days later a body of Sinn Feiners occupied Stephen's Green, Dublin, seized the post office and other public buildings and houses, and threatened Dublin Castle. Troops were hurried to Ireland from Belfast and from England, and the rebellion was suppressed after a week of fighting, but not until serious damage had been done to the city of Dublin and many lives lost among soldiers, police, and rebels. In other parts of Ireland less serious risings were more easily suppressed.

The measures taken by the Government during this week left no room for criticism, but as soon as the rebellion was suppressed Ministers, and especially Mr. Birrell, the Chief Secretary for Ireland, were hotly assailed for having failed to foresee and taken measures to prevent the rising. "I fully appreciate my own position," Mr. Birrell had written from Dublin, while the guns were still firing, and "of course I can't go on"; and again a day later, "all this shatters me. The thing that has happened swallows up the things that might have happened had I otherwise acted," i.e. had he forced Sinn Fein

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into the open and possibly thrown Ireland into an uproar by challenging it instead of waiting for its challenge. Though ready to face the House of Commons, and confident that he could put up a good fight for himself, Mr. Birrell realised that the verdict at that moment would almost certainly be against him, and unreservedly tendered his resignation. Asquith accepted it "with infinite regret" as in the circumstances inevitable, but he told the House of Commons in the debate which took place a few days later (3rd May) that "in the whole of his public life he had not suffered a personal loss which he had felt more acutely." The tribute was sincere, for no two men had a more intimate regard for each other or keener appreciation of each other's flavour and quality than Asquith and Birrell. Of their final interview in the Prime Minister's room after his resignation Mr. Birrell writes: "I don't remember what he *said*, but I know he *wept* and stood staring out of the window jingling some half-crowns in his pocket."

Criticism now took another turn, and a week later the Government was attacked by Irish and radicals for the indiscriminate vengeance which was alleged to have been wreaked on the rebels. Mr. John Dillon told the House that the Prime Minister was being kept in the dark as to the secret shootings and imprisonments in military barracks, and that Dublin was being maddened by rumours of massacres. The country was under martial law, and a certain discretion had necessarily to be given to Sir John Maxwell, the Commander-in-Chief, who had been sent to Ireland to deal with the rebellion, but Asquith claimed that Sir John had used his power with moderation, and pointed out that so far only thirteen rebels had been executed, and only two more were awaiting execution. There was one lamentable case, that of Mr. Sheehy Skeffington, a Dublin journalist, in no way implicated in the Rebellion, who had been shot without the knowledge of the military authorities, and about this he could only say that the officer who had directed the shooting would be tried by court-martial.[1] As a matter of fact Asquith himself had all through this week been urging leniency wherever possible,[2] and the Cabinet instructions had been that the "period of execution" should be brought to a close at the earliest possible moment. "It is not an Irish rebellion, and it would be a pity if *ex post facto* it became one," Mr. Birrell had written just before he left Dublin, and Asquith was determined that, if he could help it, it should not become one. But the situation was full of peril. There were loyalists who were saying openly they were glad this had happened since it would make an end of Home Rule and stir the British Government to a renewal of resolute Government. There were Nationalists on the brink of Sinn Fein and threatening to go over if a policy of vengeance was pursued and martial law made perpetual. Between the two stood discredited British officials and a bureaucracy greatly shaken and waiting to take its cue from Downing Street.

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[1] He was afterwards court-martialed and found guilty but insane.

[2] The Cabinet considered the question whether Sir Roger Casement should be executed on at least three occasions with evident anxiety to discover a loophole if one could be found. The only possible loophole was a certificate of insanity which no competent medical authority would sign. Failing this Ministers felt it impossible to reprieve the ring-leader when thirteen of his followers had suffered the extreme penalty.

Asquith decided that he must go to Ireland himself and form his own judgment on the spot. He went on 11th May and returned on the 19th, and in these days travelled all over the country, visiting Cork, Belfast, and Dublin. He not only had long consultations with officials, soldiers, and lawyers, but saw and talked to men of all parties and anyone who seemed likely to give a good independent view. A malicious story that he had "shaken hands with murderers" and promised them leniency was built up on the fact that he visited the prisons and places of internment and satisfied himself that the prisoners had no legitimate ground for complaint on the score of their treatment—a wise and humane precaution in view of allegations heedlessly made, and easily believed in the atmosphere of that time. His letters to his wife, and a letter to the Home Secretary, Mr. Herbert Samuel, give some idea of his activities.

Asquith to his Wife.

VICEREGAL LODGE,
DUBLIN.
Fri., May 12th, 1916.

We had on the whole quite a good journey, and got here after driving slowly through the devastated part of Dublin, soon after 6 a.m.

The Wimbornes seem to be in fairly good spirits, and she is full of pride as she narrates Ivor's deeds of prowess and sagacity in the early days of the rebellion. I had a long talk with him and afterwards with the General this morning. The latter seems to be confident that he had got things well in hand, and that there need be no more executions, after the two this morning, which I told the House yesterday must be carried out.

After lunch Bongie[1] and I went to the Castle where I spent a couple of hours or more with Campbell, the Attorney General and Chalmers, settling a number of questions which have arisen. On the whole—except the Skeffington case—there have been fewer bad blunders than one might have expected with the soldiery for a whole week in exclusive charge.

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[1] Sir Maurice Bonham Carter.

I am going to-morrow to the prison and hospital, and to see a large number of representative people. . . .

VICEREGAL LODGE,
DUBLIN.
Sunday, May 14th, 1916.

I had rather a busy day yesterday, and after lunch I went to the Richmond Barracks where there are 300 or 400 Sinn Fein (or so-called) prisoners. I visited three rooms with batches of 25 or so in each, and talked to them all. They were mostly from remote parts of the country, and none had taken any part in the Dublin rising. Some of them were very fine-looking fellows: an extraordinary number had beautiful eyes. I have no doubt that they lied freely, but all the same there were a lot who had much better have been left at home. I told Maxwell and his men to comb them out carefully and only send to England those against whom there was a real case. I asked them all whether they had any complaint to make of their treatment in prison, and they all said No, except one man who asked for a pillow. I then went to the Hospital to see the wounded soldiers of whom there are a fair number, mostly doing very well. Afterwards Alice Wimborne and I went to Trinity College, where Maxwell reviewed the Officers Training Corps, and other Volunteers who had helped to put down the rising. Old Mahaffy was there, and we went to tea to his Lodge, where was Miss Mahaffy, quite in her old form. I spent the rest of the day at the Castle with Chalmers. There were large crowds about, who cheered and were most civil; not a sign of any kind even of glumness. They are an extraordinary people. We had a big dinner with another lot of "representative" people, and there are more to-day. To-morrow I go for the inside of the day to Belfast, returning for dinner. There is still a lot to do here, and I am in despair for a Chief Secretary. If only Simon were available.

DUBLIN.
Tuesday, May 16th, 1916.

I couldn't write yesterday as I spent the whole day travelling to and from and being at Belfast. It is over 100 miles from here, and we motored both ways, making an early start and returning just in time for dinner. We went in a Rolls-Royce, but took 3½ hours each way. The Lord Mayor had arranged for me to meet at lunch eight or ten of the most hard-bitten Carsonite leaders to be found in the place; all of them big employers of labour. It was a very curious experience, as I talked to them quite freely about disarmament, political settlement, relation of Ulster to rest of Ireland, etc., etc. They were all very civil, and one or two of them highly intelligent, particularly the Lord Mayor, and one McDowell, whom Bonar Law told me Carson wanted me particularly to meet. Their genuine and inextinguishable hatred of and contempt for the Catholics of the South is very curious. They believe them to be a man both idle and disloyal, and make no distinction of any kind between

Sinn Feiners and Redmonites. Certainly Belfast, which is to look at a very superior Manchester, is a wonderful creation of its kind—in marvellous contrast to the "out-of-repair" look which everything (including the scenery) wears in the greater part of Ireland. We parted on the best of terms, and I was quite enthusiastically cheered and hand-shaken by the crowd—in Belfast of all places. You never get to the bottom of this most perplexing and damnable country.

Asquith to Mr. Herbert Samuel

VICEREGAL LODGE,
DUBLIN.
Sunday, 14 *May*, 1916.

I have just read your Mem. dated 15th, on the subject of the interned rebels.

I hope you will be able to go on without either amendment of the existing Regulation (you know my objections to the "ex posto facto" suggestion in any of the proposed forms) or new legislations.

Yesterday I visited the Richmond Barracks in which 3 or 400 of these prisoners are confined, and I spoke with many of them. I may say, by the way, that in reply to my questions whether they had anything to complain of in their treatment, they one and all answered in the negative, except one man who asked for a pillow. They almost all come from more or less remote country districts, and had taken no active part in the rising. The Police have been drag-netting the countryside, and I have little doubt that a number of these men ought not to have been arrested.

I accordingly directed the Military Authorities, who have a good legal adviser in Col. Byrne of the W.O., to begin at once combing them out, and I hope that the result will be that comparatively few will be sent over to England.

I think that a similar process of combing should be at once applied to your interned, and Maxwell has written in that sense to the W.O. There will probably be found to be a number of cases of men who might be released without sending them to the Advisory Committee.

Everything is quiet here, but so far the giving in of arms, especially in Cork and some parts of the South, is not satisfactory.

His first business on returning to London was to report to the King, and then after a Sabbath day's rest, at the Wharf, he made a full statement to the Cabinet.

What he had heard and seen in Ireland more than ever convinced him that, while all necessary power was given to Sir John Maxwell and the soldiers to maintain order, something must be done immediately to prevent the stampede from Nationalism to Sinn Fein, which he saw coming inevitably if there were serious doubts in Ireland about the intentions of the British Parliament to grant Home Rule. In the next few days he so far impressed his Unionist colleagues as to induce them to consent to negotiations between the

Government and the leaders of the Irish parties towards bringing the Home Rule Act into operation without delay. His general idea was that, even if a Bill to this effect were pushed through Parliament at once, actual Home Rule would probably not come into operation until the War was over, but that all doubts would in the meantime be removed as to the good faith of British politicians. He was in any case willing to trust the Irish parliamentary party to administer the domestic affairs of Ireland, and he had been assured by his military advisers that a very moderate force would be sufficient to keep order.

The negotiations were undertaken by Mr. Lloyd George, who saw Mr. Redmond and Sir Edward Carson, and within a short time produced a plan which was provisionally accepted by both. The main features of this were that the Home Rule Act of 1914 should be brought into immediate operation; that an Amending Bill should be introduced at once (as " a strictly War Emergency Act to cover only the period of the War and a short specified interval after it ") providing that the six Ulster counties should remain under the Imperial Government, and that the Irish members should remain at Westminster in their full numbers during that time. After the War an Imperial Conference of representatives from all the Dominions was to be held to consider the future Government of the Empire, including the question of the Government of Ireland; and immediately after this Conference, the settlement of all outstanding problems including that of the permanent position of the six Ulster counties was to be proceeded with. The Ulster Unionists authorised Sir Edward Carson to continue and complete negotiations on this basis at a meeting on 9th June and the Nationalists signified their general acceptance ten days later at a Convention in Belfast at which Mr. Devlin was the chief speaker.

II

It soon became clear that the three negotiators had gone ahead of the Unionist members of the Cabinet, and a long and stubborn battle ensued which, once more, all but broke the Coalition. Lord Selborne, on hearing what the three recommended, handed in his resignation without awaiting for the Cabinet decision, but others who shared his views decided to remain and assert them within the Cabinet. On 27th June Ministers met twice in the course of the day and wrestled with the question for many hours. The occasion has historical importance as one of the final landmarks in the story of

British and Irish relations, and the argument must be set out in detail. 1916 Age 63

The opposition was led by Lord Lansdowne and Mr. Long, both of whom argued vehemently that the setting up of an Irish Parliament at that moment would be a surrender to rebels which would probably lead to a recrudescence of rebellion. Mr. Long doubted the genuineness of the Nationalist acceptance, and thought the concession would be used to press the Government for more. Mr. Bonar Law strongly differed from his Unionist colleagues. He thought the rejection of the settlement would drive the whole of Nationalist Ireland—Redmonites as well as Sinn Feiners—into one hostile camp, and he should therefore recommend his party to ratify the proposals. He added, however, that his own action must depend on their decision, and that if they were at all evenly balanced his position in the Government would become impossible. Lord Curzon was apprehensive of the consequences, and feared that in the event of an election an Irish Parliament might take on a revolutionary colour. He also doubted also whether the House of Lords could be induced to pass the necessary Bill. Mr. Austen Chamberlain wanted assurances, which Asquith gave, that no general amnesty was intended, and Lord Crewe expressed the opinion which was shared by the Liberal members of the Cabinet that any scheme agreed to between Mr. Redmond and Sir Edward Carson ought to be accepted, at all events for the time being.

General Sir John Maxwell was then invited to attend the Cabinet, and he expressed the view that there was no chance of any serious rising in Ireland. A Division of good troops under an Imperial General could always, in his opinion, safeguard the military situation.

After a morning sitting the Cabinet sat again at seven, when the argument was taken up by Lord Grey, who strongly supported the arrangement and dwelt with great force on the effect of rejection and a divided Ministry on the situation in America. What followed may best be told in the words in which Asquith himself reported it to the King:

> "Mr. Balfour delivered the most effective pronouncement in this prolonged conclave. As a veteran Unionist he dissociated himself entirely from the position taken up by Lord Lansdowne and Mr. Long. He denied that the proposed arrangement could be properly regarded as a 'concession to rebellion'; on the contrary in his view it might be far more fairly represented as a Unionist triumph; the exclusion of the six counties having been the maximum demand of the Unionist leaders at the Buckingham Palace Conference. He pointed out with unanswerable

force the absurdity of the contention (already refuted by Sir J. Maxwell) that the establishment at a distance of, at the earliest six or eight, and, more probably, twelve or even eighteen months of a Home Rule Parliament could seriously embarrass our action in the war. Mr. Balfour laid stress on the importance of not alienating American opinion at this juncture, and declared himself a whole-hearted supporter of the policy of Sir E. Carson and Mr. Bonar Law."

At this point Mr. Lloyd George suggested a small Cabinet Committee for the further consideration of safeguards for the maintenance of Imperial and Naval and Military control during the War. Lord Lansdowne, Lord Curzon, and Mr. Austen Chamberlain declared themselves ready to accept this for the time being, but Mr. Long remained unconvinced. The conclusion must be told in Asquith's words :

> "Thereupon the Prime Minister intervened. He told his colleagues frankly that in his opinion at this critical juncture in the war, a series of resignations and a possible dissolution of the Government would be not only a national calamity but a national crime. He appealed with much emphasis to all his colleagues to avert such a catastrophe. The proposed settlement would in his opinion have been accepted on all sides before the war and would be accepted with equal unanimity after the war. He admitted that to bring it into operation during the war required special safeguards for the maintenance of an effective and undisputed Imperial control of all naval and military conditions in Ireland and elsewhere.
>
> He therefore proposed (and the Cabinet, with the exception of Mr. Long, unanimously agreed) that a Committee consisting of the P.M., Mr. Lloyd George, Lord R. Cecil and the Attorney General, should at once proceed to consider and formulate such additions as seemed to them to be necessary for this purpose to the arrangements already agreed upon between the Irish leaders between now and next Thursday. On this footing all the Ministers who had threatened resignations (including with much personal reluctance Mr. Long) agreed to retain in the meantime their offices."

The Committee presented its report on 5th July when Asquith, though holding to his own opinion that the provisions of the Irish Government Act were sufficient, declared himself ready to waive this view and consent to the insertion in the Bill of an express enactment for safeguarding the military and naval situation as proposed by the Solicitor-General and Lord Robert Cecil. He reported that Mr. Redmond was willing to leave this matter to the Cabinet. What followed may again be told in Asquith's own words :

> "Lord Lansdowne found himself confronted with the horns of a dilemma, either horn of which seemed to him to promise danger if not disaster. In making his choice what weighed with him was the domestic situation. If he and others resigned, the result must be a break-up of

the Coalition Government with a consequent period of recriminations and political chaos which might possibly necessitate the worst of evils—a General Election. Subject to the condition that Imperial control of matters relating to the war and public order was during the war secured, he had come to the conclusion that while heartily disliking and distrusting the proposed settlement, and awaiting the form which it might ultimately take, it was his duty not to resign at this moment.

Mr. Long said his position was a cruel one, He was convinced that if he were to resign now, he would carry with him a considerable section of the Unionist Party; and recognised that in view of the general military and political situation this might seriously weaken us in the war, and was, therefore, very reluctantly compelled to associate himself with Lord Lansdowne's resolution not to resign.

The Prime Minister acknowledged the patriotism and public spirit displayed by his two colleagues, which had averted a most undesirable and dangerous situation, and assured them that their present attitude would not be construed as fettering their future freedom of action.

The result, Mr. Asquith humbly submits to your Majesty, is very satisfactory, Lord Selborne's being the only resignation, and amply justified the delay which has obviated premature and precipitate action."[1]

Possibly if Ministers had been aware that they held in their hands all but the last chance of settling the Irish question by the establishment of a subordinate Parliament in Dublin, the sequel might have been different, but as it turned out, the Prime Minister's satisfaction was premature. Once more the limits of reluctant conversion were very soon reached, and the prospects of settlement faded rapidly as the two parties approached the details of the proposed measure.

III

On 11th July Lord Lansdowne, speaking in the House of Lords, explained the proposed settlement in terms which greatly incensed Mr. Redmond and all but extinguished the hope of agreement. He spoke of the proposed Bill as one which would "make a structural alteration in the Act of 1914," and therefore be "permanent and enduring in its character." "We fully intend," he said, "that the Defence of the Realm Act, which will remain in force, should, if necessary, be strengthened." "That of course," he added, "is an Act which the Irish Parliament, whenever it is called into existence, will be unable to interfere with at any point." He finally enumerated various measures which the Government intended to take "to undo the mischief which has arisen during the last few years," such as the keeping of a "sufficient garrison to prevent a recurrence of disorder," a system of trial by resident magistrates instead of by ordinary bench and Irish jury, the refusal of a general amnesty, the prohibition of carrying arms without permit, and so forth.

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[1] Letter to the King, 6th July.

The speech was no doubt the honest expression of an impenitent South-Irish Unionist, but if it had been deliberately intended to wreck the settlement, it could have hardly done it more effectively. Mr. Redmond described it as "a gross insult to Ireland," and though Lord Lansdowne afterwards explained that he did not mean all that had been imputed to him, the effect was beyond repair. Asquith wrote the next day to Lord Crewe:

Asquith to Lord Crewe.

10 Downing Street,
July 12th, 1916.

Secret.

My dear Crewe,

Lansdowne's speech has given the greatest offence to the Irish, and it was with difficulty that they were dissuaded from asking me to-day whether it represented the policy of the Government.

It is, of course, its general tone and temper which especially irritates them. Specified points to which they take objection are (1) the suggestion that the Ulster exclusion is a "structural alteration" in the Act of 1914 and will be "permanent and enduring." This I think was singularly tactless and inaccurate, and totally uncalled for by the subject-matter of the debate.

(2) The suggestion made more than once that the Defence of the Realm Act may need to be widened and strengthened in Ireland.

(3) The suggestion that we are going to "have recourse to trial before Resident Magistrates," and that their number is to increase.

This is interpreted as meaning that Ireland is going to be "proclaimed" under the Crimes Act, and "coercion" reintroduced. The only case in which so far trial by Resident Magistrates has been sanctioned is that of "unlawful assembly" (cattle-driving) which needs no proclamation. And although I told him of this, I never intended that he should say more than that we are inquiring whether the number of Resident Magistrates is adequate.

Ever yours,
H. H. A.

The death-blow was given by the refusal of the Unionist members of the Cabinet to consent to the retention of the Irish members in full numbers in the House of Commons after the Irish Parliament had been set up. If, as Lord Lansdowne had said, the Imperial Government was still to exercise the right of passing for Ireland any exceptional legislation that seemed necessary for the war period, this was a necessary corollary; but Mr. Bonar Law took the point that 80 Irish members might determine what Government should carry on the affairs of the country, and no English Unionist, he said, could agree to that.[1] The Cabinet was now slipping farther and farther away from the original draft terms, and the Irish said bluntly that there was no prospect of obtaining consent for these amendments. Asquith was deeply disappointed, but argument and remonstrances having failed, there was nothing for it but to drop the scheme and return to government through Lord Lieutenant and Chief Secretary at Dublin Castle. Lord Wimborne, who had resigned *pro forma* after the Rebellion, was re-appointed as Lord Lieutenant and Mr. Duke appointed as Chief Secretary.

The Royal Commission appointed to inquire into the causes of the rebellion commented severely on the tolerance of seditious movements "first in Ulster and then in other districts of Ireland" which had rendered the recent movements possible, but it said nothing about the political causes which had been tending to this climax, or of the difficulty of conducting a campaign of repression in Ireland during the War until the necessity for it was proved. The course of events in Ireland since the War began had been singularly unfortunate, and not only through the lack of repressive measures. In spite of the generous adhesion to the common cause of the Irish parliamentary party, the old bitterness had persisted and found vent, after the War had broken out, in a prolonged and vehement resistance to the enactment of the Home Rule Bill even though its operation was suspended for the period of the War. Inevitable as it might be, the coming of the Coalition, with Sir Edward Carson as a prominent member, rekindled Irish suspicions; and all through the business of recruiting some perverse spirit seemed to be at work quenching Irish zeal and repelling Irish overtures. "From the very first hour," Mr. Redmond told the House of Commons,[2] "our efforts were thwarted, ignored, and snubbed. Our suggestions were derided. Everything almost, that we asked for was refused, and everything almost that we protested against was done. Everything which tended to arouse national pride and enthusiasm in connection with the War was rigorously suppressed." Asquith could only say that he was "the last person to deny that dreadful mistakes and most regrettable blunders had been made," and Mr. Lloyd George added that "some of the stupidities which sometimes almost looked like malignities perpetrated at the beginning of recruiting in Ireland were beyond belief." It was always difficult to decide who was responsible, but in general it may be said that the rooted traditional

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[1] House of Commons, 31st July, 1916.
[2] Debate on Irish recruiting, 18th October, 1916.

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War Office suspicion of "rebel Ireland" and its fear of making concessions to national sentiment in anything that touched the Army had coloured many of its proceedings in Ireland and led to the belief that Irish overtures were not welcome to military England. Mr. Redmond claimed it in the circumstances to be no mean feat that 167,000 Irish—95,000 Catholic and 62,000 Protestants—were serving in army and navy, but he and his colleagues were aware that the ground was slipping from under their feet, and they very frankly expressed their opinion that England was wasting another and possibly her last opportunity.

Asquith too was aware of it, and no one more than he deplored his inability to carry his colleagues with him on what he believed to be the statesmanlike line. It is interesting to find that Mr. Balfour, in spite of his lifelong opposition to Home Rule, was with him on this occasion and declared his readiness to brave the opposition of his party for the sake of peace in Ireland. Mr. Bonar Law too was favourable to the scheme on its merits, but his condition. that his party must consent proved in the end to be a fatal obstacle. The great majority of the Unionist Party were undoubtedly behind Lord Lansdowne and Mr. Long, and took the conservative and conventional view that the setting up of a Home Rule Parliament on the morrow of the Rebellion would have been a truckling to treason which would have lowered British prestige and encouraged the disloyal. That being so, the settlement had to be at another time and in another way.

IV

The records of the economic Conference between the Allies which was held at Paris in June of this year have little more than an antiquarian interest in these times, but they throw a curious sidelight on the state of opinion in the middle of the War. They show the Allies in a state of apprehension, lest when the military war ended, Germany and Austria-Hungary should start an aggressive economic war against their former enemies. So little was the actual end of the War—the utter exhaustion of Germany and the destruction of the Austro-Hungarian Empire—foreseen by the delegates who met in Paris that, in addition to certain necessary measures for the war period and the period of reconstruction, they laid down a "permanent" system of "mutual assistance and collaboration among the Allies" to meet this expected aggression. Had this scheme materialised, not the British Commonwealth of Nations, but the Allies of the Great War would have been the economic block to

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which Great Britain would have belonged. In point of fact all that survived from the resolutions of this Conference was the protection afforded to optical glass, aniline dyes, and one or two other commodities deemed essential for the carrying on of war in which the Germans had or were supposed to have a monopoly.

Asquith shared the general opinion at this time, and in the speech in which he explained the Paris resolutions to the House of Commons he dwelt on the fact that Germany had destroyed factories in France and Belgium and carried off large quantities of plant and raw material, and said it was evident that the Germans were counting on these factors, and on the possession of their safely interned merchant fleet to impede the industrial and commercial recovery of the Allies. "They are already organising their industries," he told the House, "for an attack on our Allied markets and for a vigorous, and, if possible, a victorious competition in neutral markets." Free-traders scented mischief in the projected alliance with Protectionist foreign countries for a defensive economic war, but Mr. Bonar Law helped by saying that it was a question "not of a tariff but of a reasonable organisation," and Asquith had his Free-trade colleagues with him (and especially Mr. Runciman and Mr. Harcourt, both of whom had played a large part in preparing the resolutions) when he maintained that there was no infraction of Free-trade principles in taking exceptional measures to meet the threatened economic war. Throughout the discussions on this subject, the ruling hypothesis was that of war, either military or economic, and in later years Asquith firmly maintained that the arguments used on this occasion had no relevance to the normal conditions of peace. Similarly in the previous years he had defended the McKenna duties as temporary war-time measures deliberately intended to discourage the importation of luxuries and non-essentials at a time when tonnage was scarce and money and credit were needed for the necessaries of life.

CHAPTER XLVIII

ASQUITH AND HIS CRITICS

Death of Raymond Asquith—Death of Kitchener—The vacancy at the War Office—Appointment of Mr. Lloyd George as Secretary for War—Asquith and the newspapers—A concerted attack—The importance of seeming active—Dislike of propaganda and self-advertisement—An appeal for forbearance—Asquith's attitude to the Press. C. A. & J. A. S.

1916 Age 64 In the September of this year Asquith sustained a maiming blow by the death in France of his eldest son Raymond. His four sons of military age had all joined the Army in the early months of the War. All had offered and three had been accepted for foreign service, the fourth, Cyril, who had suffered from a long spell of ill-health, being relegated by a succession of medical boards to home defence in a territorial regiment. In this regiment—The Queen's Westminster Rifles—Raymond had originally obtained a commission, but later transferred to the Grenadier Guards. Herbert, once President of the Oxford Union, at this time a Chancery Barrister, and since a novelist of mark and distinction, joined the gunners, in which he served throughout the War, was wounded and shell-shocked and attained the rank of Captain. Arthur's military (or naval) career was one of variety and brilliance. Within a few days of receiving a commission in the Royal Naval Division he was sent on Mr. Churchill's abortive Antwerp expedition. At Gallipoli he gained the Croix de Guerre. Later in France, he was awarded (in February 1917) a D.S.O. for gallantry in a night attack on the Ancre, to which in the same year were added no less than two bars, one in connection with the capture of Gavrelle, and the other with fighting at Paschendaele. He finished the War with four wounds (one involving the loss of a leg) and the rank of Brigadier-General. Scars and honours left him, as they had found him, spirited, stoical and modest. He has since achieved solid success in the City.

Raymond's superlative intellectual prowess had held for his father a supreme fascination. The way in which his eldest son had swept the board at Oxford, first equalling and then surpassing his own record: his easy command of the resources of language, the effortless power and grace of his mind would have brought a glow to the heart of a less partial parent; or to one who savoured intellectual distinction less acutely. The word "brilliant" is sadly overworked, but for Raymond it seemed almost to have been invented. Among his contemporaries at Oxford were mental machines of equal power—his friend H. T. Baker is an instance,—but these would have been the first to allow that in two qualities he left all competitors standing, namely the rapidity, almost uncanny in degree, of his apprehension, and the felicity and readiness of his verbal wit. At the end of this chapter will be found two lampoons from his pen which may be allowed to speak for themselves: but generally speaking his "*mots*" were embodied in the fugitive medium of conversation and have perished for want of record along with the curious voice whose dry emphasis seemed to sharpen their edge. 1910 Age 64

The only member of the family to succumb, he seemed the last to be marked out for warlike experience. "I am joining the army," he said, "because the alternative is to spend the rest of my life in explaining why I did not," and he never ceased to be amused at the conception of himself as a soldier. It was in truth an ironical stroke which reserved the simple majesty of a death in battle for this infinitely complex and civilised, scornful and sophisticated being. Yet the paradox had a certain inevitability. At the end of a series of dazzling successes at Oxford he had confessed to a friend that he found life "a little bare of motives." Ordinary ambition he had none and it was without exhilaration but with a sort of listless acceptance that he had embarked on the earlier stages of a forensic and political career. Something in his nature rebelled against the monotonous round of trivial success and the tedium of applause too easily gained to be savoured: welcomed the upheaval which broke its "long littleness," and demanded that if sacrifice was in store for him, it should be simple and unqualified. His last thoughts, when mortally wounded on 15th September in a phase of the battle of the Somme, and his last message, were for his wife and his father. His death left on both an indelible scar.

II

Apart from this sorrow and his anxiety for his other sons, the death of Kitchener in the foundering of the *Hampshire* on 5th June had been another heavy blow, and its tragic circumstances affected Asquith profoundly. There were certain fundamental similarities in the two men which enabled them to understand one another. Both

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took large, massive, and patient views; both despised fussers and agitators. The ways of politicians were a mystery to Kitchener, and it had needed all Asquith's skill and patience to steer him through the political labyrinth, and, when need arose, to mediate between him and his civilian colleagues. His attachment to Kitchener was not at all qualified, but rather heightened by the humorous appreciation of his little foibles and idiosyncrasies which finds expression in the *Aides Mémoire*. This too had helped when tempers had been frayed and more solemn people had been near the breaking-point. Asquith was not blind to Kitchener's defects, but he well knew his worth, and he could say with a clear conscience that he had done his utmost to give full play to his great qualities at the moment when they were of the highest value to the country.

Who was to fill the vacant place at the War Office? Asquith pondered the question deeply, for he knew the answer to be big with fate for himself and his Government, but he decided—it must be admitted with considerable reluctance—that he would not be justified in passing over the Minister of Munitions, who had been more closely associated with the conduct of the War than any other civilian Minister, and whose claim, if he were willing to take the place, was undeniable. His one doubt had been whether Mr. Bonar Law, as leader of the Unionist Party, had not a prior claim, but when Mr. Bonar Law intimated that he too desired Mr. Lloyd George's appointment, he could see no valid reasons against it. Mr. Lloyd George had greatly distinguished himself by his zeal and energy in organising the Munitions supply, and he had behind him a strong body of opinion which held that he ought to be more intimately associated with the conduct of the War. There were many warning voices. Asquith was told that he was putting his most dangerous critic and rival in the place where he had the largest opportunity of making trouble, and that he was inviting friction in the conduct of the War by placing this persistent critic of the soldiers in daily contact with the General Staff and its Chief, Sir William Robertson. But merely to suggest the idea that he could do anything less than justice to a colleague for a reason personal to himself was to stiffen his resolve that this motive should not weigh. He was, moreover, honestly of opinion that closer association with the soldiers would convince Mr. Lloyd George that their objections to his plans for altering the direction of the War were not the pure obstructions that he had thought them to be. Lady Oxford wrote in her diary, the day Mr. Lloyd George was appointed Secretary for War: "We are out, it is only a question of time when we shall have to leave

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Downing Street,"[1] and her intuition was, not for the first time, shrewder than that of the practised politicians, the "confidential few" who, as she records, met her prognostications with "surprise, tempered by disagreement." Mr. Lloyd George, as it turned out, was not reconciled to the soldiers' views by his five months' association with the General Staff; he was more than ever convinced at the end of it that the direction of the War needed to be altered.

III

During all these months and while he was daily grappling with incredible difficulties Asquith had been assailed with extraordinary bitterness by a section of the Press, and especially the newspapers under the control of Lord Northcliffe. Everything that went wrong on every front was imputed to him; his patient efforts to compose quarrels and preserve unity were construed as dilatoriness and weakness; no allowance was made for the inevitable limits to what could be done by one man who had to govern through a coalition at home, and adjust every step in policy or strategy to the views and claims of at least three other Governments. He was said to be "waiting and seeing," even to be deliberately sparing the Germans while British soldiers poured out their blood in vain on the stricken field. Some of this criticism was honest in that it reflected a genuine loss of nerve and despair on the part of the critics, but not a little of it seemed deliberately designed to make mischief and embarrass Asquith personally.

His general attitude towards his newspaper critics and the little group which worked hand in glove with them in the Government and in the House of Commons was one of patient endurance. A united Cabinet might have silenced Lord Northcliffe; a divided one was in danger of breaking itself if it went beyond fulminations which were worse than useless, unless followed by action. To Asquith the idea of engaging in controversy with newspapers at such a time was deeply repugnant. He would leave them to the public judgment. Again and again his colleagues urged him to speak up for himself, to repay them in their own coin. No one when roused had such a formidable armoury of weapons, defensive and offensive, but bring them out he would not, except against the common enemy. Instead he appeared week after week in the House of Commons, admitting faults and failures, holding strictly to the theory of his collective responsibility, stretching it to cover military disasters as well as

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[1] *The Autobiography of Margot Asquith*, II, p. 245.

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political miscalculations, standing at all times between the generals in the field and impatient criticism at home, loyally defending every colleague, and in the process accepting blame where no intelligent man or woman could have held him blameworthy. This inspired deep respect among those who knew, but it left him exposed without defence to concerted attacks which, renewed day by day in a group of newspapers and falling upon a public racked with anxiety, undoubtedly weakened his position in the public eye.

In a letter to Asquith in February 1916, Mr. Bonar Law said a true word: "In war it is necessary not only to be active but to seem active." Mr. Lloyd George understood this and Asquith did not, or, if he understood it, declined to act on it. It seemed to him sufficient that he should be engaged all day behind the scenes in anxious and laborious work, and he had neither time nor inclination for the business of sweetening the Press and advertising his own activities. All that in subsequent years came to be called propaganda and especially that form of it which was a subtle self-advertisement of members of the Government was abhorrent to him, and nothing could induce him to lend himself to it. This abstinence was admirable in peace-time, when the highest reputation that a statesman can enjoy is that he puts his mind into the common stock and claims no credit for himself which does not belong equally to his colleagues; but in war the stage needs to be set and lit for the principal figures, and Asquith's ingrained habit of self-effacement left the public without the sense of exciting and dramatic movement which it looked for in a Government at war.

There is a revealing passage which shows his own thoughts about himself in a letter to his wife:

> "These last three years I have lived under a perpetual strain, the like of which has, I suppose, been experienced by very few men living or dead. It is no exaggeration to say that I have had on hand more often half a dozen problems than a single one—personal, political, parliamentary, etc.—most days of the week. I am reputed to be of a serene, "imperturbable" temperament, and I do my best in the way of self-control. But I admit that I am often irritated and impatient, and that then I become curt and perhaps taciturn. I fear you have suffered from this more than anyone."

The impatience and irritation were seldom shown in public, but now and again he broke through his reserve and appealed to the House of Commons to exercise forbearance to the Government. Such an appeal may be found in a speech during the session of 1916:

> "People are naturally impatient—no one can blame them—for some

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decisive victory. They are naturally sore and depresssed at a deplorable incident, though not one of serious military significance, like the surrender last week of the heroic garrison at Kut. That has been the case in every great war in which we have ever been engaged. Let anyone turn to the speeches, articles, and pamphlets during the early years of the revolutionary war, when Mr. Pitt was Prime Minister of this country; or later, and more remarkable still, when the Duke of Wellington was fighting up to the very eve of Salamanca in the Peninsula. You will find yourselves reading exactly the same kind of thing that is furnished to the public daily in the newspapers. There is the same denunciation of indecision, of procrastination, of half-heartedness, and of delay; the same portraits drawn of vacillating statesmen and of incompetent generals, the Duke of Wellington being the chief villain of the piece; and the same cry, exactly the same cry, for the appearance of a saviour or a combination of saviours. Even the same criticisms in detail repeat themselves. At one moment the country was told, as it is told now, quite contrary to the fact, that civilians in the Government insisted throughout on overruling their naval and military experts. At another moment it is told, as I feel sure it will be when the papers about Mesopotamia, which we are about to produce, are circulated, that the Government are the too subservient tools of their military advisers. We are told again—and it seems to be told again by way of reproach to the Government—that we are everywhere on the defensive; and when the next offensive, with its toll of casualties, occurs, we shall be lectured by the same people on the folly of premature action. My answer to all this is, not that there have not been mistakes or blunders—of course there have, perhaps both in policy and strategy—but that our contribution—the contribution of this kingdom and Empire—to the common cause has grown and is growing steadily month by month. It is greater at this moment and better directed than it has ever been before, and the naval and military situation of the Allies as a whole was never so good as it is to-day. We must put up with these things. We can be indifferent to them, so long as we feel that we have behind us the confidence of the people. If we have not, then let the House say so. Let it find—I do not care where it seeks for them—another body of men more zealous, more loyal, more assiduous in the discharge of their task. Let it find another body of men better qualified for the art of government and the practice of administration in these exacting days. I can say with perfect sincerity that there is not a man sitting on this bench among my colleagues who is attached to his daily work by any other tie than the sense of duty and love of his country. We cannot—I say it deliberately—we cannot carry the heaviest burden that has ever been laid upon the shoulders of British statesmen unless we can feel we have not only the sympathy, but the trust of our countrymen." House of Commons, 2nd May, 1916.

IV

A word more may be said here about Asquith's views on the relations of the Press and public men. They were much misunderstood, and in the end exposed him to a sub-current of professional

1916 Age 64 hostility by no means confined to his political opponents. He was supposed to dislike the Press, to make himself deliberately inaccessible to journalists, to be, in his own words, "curt and taciturn" to their approaches. This was never his intention. All his life he talked of himself as an "old journalist," and in his early days he had written regularly for weekly papers, including the *Economist* and the *Spectator*, and he held Hutton and Townsend in the highest regard. I have grateful memories of the confidence with which he treated me, when I was editor of the *Westminster Gazette*, and I know the serious importance which he attached to Press criticism, when he thought it to be honest. But undoubtedly he had a strong contempt for politicians who wooed the Press, and he viewed with something like abhorrence the alliances which he saw growing up in his time between politicians and Press magnates to effect changes of policy and even changes of Government. These he thought an encroachment on the proper sphere of Parliament and a serious hindrance to confidential and trustful relations between colleagues in a Cabinet.

Watching some of these manœuvres, he hardened in his resolution to have nothing to do with them, and in contrast with others who were all smiles for the Press, he seemed to go to the opposite extreme of keeping it at arm's length. He seldom walked in the Lobby, and if he did was not easily button-holed by any journalist. Though always polite, he was apt to snap a negative at the too eager questioner, and sometimes forgot that the putting of questions is a necessary part of the journalist's calling, though the answering of them is in the discretion of the person questioned. Undoubtedly in all these respects he belonged to the old school, and he was quite open in expressing his dislike of many of the manifestations of the modern Press. It was strongly put to him that he ought to establish civil relations with Lord Northcliffe when he became proprietor of *The Times*, but by this time that formidable person had come to represent all the tendencies in journalism that he most deplored, and though many well-meaning intermediaries of both sexes were willing to build the necessary bridge he steadily refused to cross it. No arguments as to the imprudence of this attitude or the consequences to which it might expose him had the slightest effect on him.[1]

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[1] Asquith's most considered statement of his views on the Press is the speech he made in the House of Commons on 11th March, 1918 on a question raised by Mr. Austen Chamberlain regarding the relations of the Government with the Press. In this he laid stress on two points as constituting a special danger in these times (1) the "syndicating" process which combined many newspapers in one ownership, and (2) the substitution of proprietors for editors in the control of newspapers.

APPENDIX

LINES ON A YOUNG VISCOUNT, WHO DIED ON THE MORROW OF A BUMP SUPPER[1]

By Raymond Asquith

Dear Viscount, in whose ancient blood
The blueness of the bird of March
And vermeil of the tufted larch
Are fused to one magenta flood:

Dear Viscount—ah! to me how dear
Who even in my frolic mood
Discerned (or sometimes thought I could)
The pure proud purpose of a Peer!

So on that last sad night of all
Erect among the reeling rout,
You beat your tangled music out,
Lofty, aloof, Viscontial;

You struck a footbath with a can,
And with the can you struck the bath;
There, on the yellow gravel path,
As gentleman to gentleman,

We met, we stood, we faced, we talked,
While those of baser birth withdrew;
I told you of a Earl I knew;
You said you thought the wine was corked;

And so we parted;—on my lips
A light farewell, but in my soul
The image of a perfect whole—
A Viscount to the finger tips.

An image! Yes: but thou art gone:
For Nature, red in tooth and claw,
Subsumes under an equal law
Viscount and Igoanodon.

Yet we who know the larger Love,
Which separates the sheep and goats,
And segregates Scolecobrots,
Believing where we cannot prove,

Deem that in His mysterious way
God puts the Peers upon His right,
And hides the poor in endless night,
For thou, my Lord, art more than they.

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[1] This skit was aimed at a familiar Oxford figure who was wont to celebrate the death of any blue-blooded acquaintance by a threnody in the manner of In Memoriam.

IN PRAISE OF YOUNG GIRLS

By Raymond Asquith

Attend, my Muse, and, if you can, approve
While I proclaim the " speeding up " of Love ;
For Love and Commerce hold a common Creed
—The scale of business varies with the speed :
For Queen of Beauty or for Sausage King
The customer is always on the wing—
Then praise the nymph who regularly earns
Small profits (if you please) but quick returns.
Our modish Venus is a bustling minx,
But who can spare the time to woo a Sphinx ?
When Monna Lisa posed with rustic guile
The stale enigma of her simple smile
Her leisured lovers raised a pious cheer
While the slow mischief crept from ear to ear.
Poor listless Lombard, you would ne'er engage
The brisker beaux of our mercurial age,
Whose lively mettle can as easy brook
An epic poem as a lingering look.
Our modern maiden smears the twig with lime
For twice as many hearts in half the time.
Long e'er the circle of that staid grimace
Has wheeled your weary dimples into place,
Our little Chloe (mark the nimble fiend)
Has raised a laugh against her bosom friend,
Melted a Marquis, mollified a Jew
Kissed every member of the Eton Crew,
Ogled a Bishop, quizzed an aged Peer,
Has danced a Tango and has dropped a tear.
Fresh from the schoolroom, pink and plump and pert,
Bedizened, bouncing, artful and alert,
No victim she of vapours or of moods—
Though the sky fall, she's " ready with the goods "—
Will suit each client, tickle every taste
Polite or gothic, libertine or chaste,
Supply a waspish tongue, a waspish waist,
Astarte's breast or Atalanta's leg,
Love ready-made or glamour off the peg.
Do you prefer " a thing of dew and air ? "
Or is your type Poppaea, or Polaire ?
The crystal casket of a maiden's dreams,
Or the last fancy in Cosmetic creams ?
The dark and tender of the fierce and bright,
Youth's rosy blush or Passion's pearly bite ?
You hardly know perhaps, but Chloe knows,
And pours you out the necessary dose,
Meticulously measuring to scale
The cup of Circe or the Holy Grail.
An Actress she at home in every rôle,
Can flout or flatter, bully or cajole
And on occasion by a stretch of art
Can even speak the language of the heart,

Can lisp and sigh and make confused replies,
With baby lips and complicated eyes,
Indifferently apt to weep or wink,
Primly pursue, provocatively shrink,
Brazen or bashful, as the case require,
Coax the faint Baron, curb the bold Esquire,
Deride restraint, but deprecate desire,
Unbridled yet unloving, loose but limp,
Voluptuary, virgin, prude, and pimp.

CHAPTER XLIX

LAST DAYS IN OFFICE

The position in 1916—The Rumanian disaster—Renewal of controversy—Mr. Lloyd George's complaints—Difficulties about recruiting—Ireland and compulsion—Lord Lansdowne's memorandum—Asquith's view of it—The alleged "Defeatism"—The decay of Parliament—Increase of agitation—The demand for new men. J. A. S.

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The military and naval events of the year 1916 had immense importance in the final result, but they gave few grounds for positive satisfaction at the time. Russia had a revival this year, and her successes against the Turks in the early months and General Brusiloff's great offensive against the Austrians in June raised hopes which were, unfortunately, not to be realised, but stubborn fighting without decisions continued almost everywhere else. The great Naval Battle of Jutland left British sea power more firmly established than ever, but it was not the spectacular triumph that the British public had expected, and controversy about the handling of the fleet by the British Naval Commanders obscured the result. Asquith, it may be said here, though always in favour of the most truthful statements about military events, was greatly annoyed at the first *communiqué* issued by the Admiralty on this occasion. He thought it unjust to the fleet and not required by the facts.

Speaking of the condition of the German army at the end of 1916, Ludendorff said in after days: "We were completely exhausted on the Western front, we now urgently needed a rest. The army had been fought to a standstill and was utterly worn out." German Headquarters, as Tirpitz records, doubted seriously whether they could hold out for another year, "especially if the enemy gave us no time for rest and for the accumulation of material." But this was not known at the time to the British people, who saw only the painful inches gained at the cost of death and wounds on an ever-mounting scale. When it came to its close in November the long-drawn-out agony of the Somme had to the outward eye resulted only in pushing the enemy a few miles back to another set of all but impregnable trenches and fortifications. Great victories there had been and deeds of heroism unequalled in the world's history, but at the end the Germans to all seeming were as firmly implanted on French soil as ever. 1916 Age 64

The surrender at Kut of General Townshend, who had been ordered by his superiors to march on Bagdad with an inadequate force, was redeemed subsequently by General Maude's brilliant operations in the same field—all preparations for which were made by Asquith's Government—but at the time it raised many questions about the divided control which had led the Home Government, on the advice of the Government of India, to sanction an operation that had not been thoroughly examined by the Imperial General Staff. Nevertheless, up to the end of the summer none of these incidents seemed to have shaken confidence in the Government, and no one had spoken more optimistically about the progress on the various fronts than Mr. Lloyd George in his survey of the military situation before Parliament rose for the autumn recess.[1]

Then came an event which was to alarm and disturb the public and to revive all the old controversies about the direction of the war. This was the disaster which befell Rumania, which on 27th August entered the war on the side of the Allies. Though tempted by the Russian successes on the Austrian front, the Rumanians had missed the favourable moment which Brusiloff's grand offensive might have offered them a few weeks earlier ; and their Generals in the teeth of advice given them by the Allied General Staffs had insisted on invading Transylvania, though in so doing they left their own territory at the mercy of the invader. The Germans, taking advantage of the opening, first swept through Wallachia, then with another force drove the Rumanians out of Transylvania, and by the end of November had surrounded Bukarest with a ring of fire. Whether Rumanian strategy or the failure of the promised Russian support was the more responsible for the disaster was much debated in military circles, but it made no difference to the result, which was only too plain to the public eye. The cry had gone up in the previous year that Serbia had been deserted, and many agitated voices now asked whether Rumania was to be abandoned to her fate. High strategy replied that if she would endure for a time the ultimate victory would restore everything and enable her to gratify her national ambitions, but this (in November 1916) was a speculation, whereas there could be no doubt of her immediate and urgent necessities.

Nothing could well have been more remote than this disaster from

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[1] House of Commons, 23rd August.

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Asquith's responsibilities or any influence that he could possibly have exercised over the course of events.[1] He had asked Mr. Lloyd George, then Secretary of State for War, to go to Paris in the first fortnight of August and negotiate with M. Briand and General Joffre the arrangements for bringing in Rumania. Before Mr. Lloyd George left London the situation was carefully reviewed by the General Staff. Sir G. Milne, the British Commander-in-Chief at Salonica, had reported that without (1) a large reinforcement of artillery and ammunition, and (2) the provision of a large number of mules to provide transport in the mountains, there was no prospect of a successful offensive. In regard to the first, we were in the middle of the battle of the Somme and there were no guns or munitions to spare, and in regard to the second it would take months to find the mules. All this was explained to Mr. Lloyd George and communicated in his presence to the French, and it was agreed at the Conference that the French should do all they could to supply the Rumanians with munitions but that the only direct help would come from Russia.

Thus, if any British Minister had a special responsibility it was the Secretary for War, who had discharged it to the best of his ability. He was aware of all the circumstances, and had seen that they were explained in the proper quarters; he had made it clear that if the Rumanians failed to obtain an immediate success with Russian aid we could at the moment give them no direct help. No blame attached to him, and if not to him, still less to the Prime Minister, who had seen to it that these precautions were taken. Nevertheless, the event gave an opening to Asquith's enemies and critics which they were quick to seize. In their hands the downfall of Rumania served to focus all the doubts and discontents of these months—the controversies about recruiting and man-power, the griefs, fears, and anxieties of the seemingly endless struggle—in a renewed attack upon the Government, whose complacency and incompetence were now the daily theme of the hostile newspapers. Worst of all for the peace of the Cabinet, it revived the slumbering controversy between Easterners and Westerners. Once more the Easterners were in a position to argue that if one of their numerous plans for transferring British troops from France to the East had been adopted these catastrophes would have been avoided and the army spared the fruitless hammering of German defences on the Western front. Early in October Mr. Lloyd George was in hot debate with Sir William Robertson about a plan for a joint French-British-Italian offensive in the direction of Sofia. The General Staff would have none of it; the Italians had their hands full with an offensive of their own, and General Joffre's whole energy was bent on pressing the enemy in France and renewing the attack on him before he could recover from his hammering in 1916. The plan was still-born, but the controversy about it did not sweeten tempers or convince the Minister for War that his ideas were erroneous. More than ever he was bent on altering the conduct of the War.

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[1] See on this subject Sir William Robertson's *Soldiers and Statesmen*, II, pp. 125–127.

II

The old question of recruiting which Asquith hoped had been settled by the general compulsion cropped up again in all manner of contentious forms. In September the military authorities started "rounding up" men of military age on the chance of catching some who had escaped or evaded the Military Service Acts. All over the country police and soldiers picketed theatres, railway stations, football grounds, closing the exits, stopping men who appeared to be of military age, demanding documentary evidence of their exemption, and, when this was not forthcoming, taking them to police stations for further investigation. This caused widespread irritation, and after a short trial was abandoned. But the contentions about man-power and its proper distribution continued in the Cabinet and between the Departments, and Asquith attempted to settle it by setting up a Man-power Distribution Board with Mr. Austen Chamberlain as chairman. This helped to define, but it could not solve, the chief problem. Mr. Lloyd George remained convinced, as he told the House of Commons when the subject was debated on 12th October, that large numbers of men were still available, but several of his most important colleagues were not less convinced that if the Army took more men from industry it would be impossible to supply the fighting forces and maintain civil life. The Man-power Board proposed various methods of "combing out" and finding substitutes for civil life for men who were fit for military service, but the yield of these measures was disappointing, and the hostile newspapers continued to say that the Government was evading the question and throwing its shield over the shirkers. A constant nagging point, with a certain popular appeal in it, was the refusal of the Government to apply compulsion to Ireland. The Cabinet was agreed that to attempt any such thing in the then condition of Ireland would be not to strengthen but weaken our hands for the winning of the War, and no responsible man thought otherwise ;[1] but Sir Edward Carson was hot on this scent, and once more it was said that the Government was shirking its duty. By his persistence in attacking the Government on this subject, and on the always popular theme of soldiers' and sailors' votes, Sir Edward caused special embarrassment to Unionist members of the Government, who saw the leadership of the Opposition slipping from their hands and themselves in danger of being branded as subservient members of an inefficient and dilatory Government. After an uncomfortable night, in which Sir Edward had been vehement on the soldiers' and sailors' theme[2] (24th October), Lord Robert Cecil wrote to Asquith : "I take the gravest view of the situation last night. It seemed to me that the House of Commons was entirely out of hand, and the Opposition not only bitter and relentless but running for blood. In my judgment unless some big stroke is made next week the Government will be in serious danger." He was undoubtedly right, but he did not suggest what the "big stroke" should be.

Before November was far advanced, rumours went out that there was a division in the Cabinet on the even more serious question of the continuance of the War. These were founded either on an imperfect knowledge of the memorandum which Lord Lansdowne presented to the Cabinet on 13th November or on the fact that certain members of the Cabinet had taken exception to the rather shrill tones of an interview which Mr. Lloyd George had given to an American newspaper in September. Asquith never joined in the reproaches which were heaped on Lord Lansdowne in the subsequent months ; on the contrary, he thought that he had acted courageously and honestly in presenting a frank statement of his opinions at that moment. The world is by no means so convinced in these days that a negotiated peace at the end of 1916 would have been a disaster, that it is necessary to defend a statesman for having dreamt of one, but as a matter of fact, Asquith did not think such a peace possible. He neither shared Lord Lansdowne's pessimism about the outlook, nor thought it probable that any terms could be obtained from

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[1] The Government had been advised that it would need a substantial addition to the troops on the spot to overcome the opposition to compulsory service in Ireland.

[2] Everyone wished to enfranchise soldiers and sailors, but there were great mechanical difficulties in preparing a register of men on the various fighting fronts, and the military authorities were not a little apprehensive of the results upon discipline if a General Election took place and political feeling ran high on these fronts.

Germany which would be favourable either to us or to our Allies.[1] His own views had been expressed in his speech at the Guildhall on 9th November.

"It is suggested in neutral countries that we Allies have a sinister design after the war is over to combine against them, and to build up an impenetrable stone wall against their trade. That is a childish fiction, for if it were true it would mean that we are, one and all, bent on economic suicide. It ought to be unnecessary to affirm, but I am afraid it is necessary to affirm, that when the time comes for peace, nothing will be more essential to the Allies from the standpoint of simple self-interest than to establish and maintain the best industrial and financial relations with the neutral Powers. The real purpose of German propaganda being, as we know it is, in each of the belligerent countries to incite a movement in favour of a separate peace, different arguments are put forward in different places. Here, for instance, in Great Britain, it was insinuated that Germany is prepared to restore the independence of Belgium and to give her compensation, that on that basis a reasonable peace could be secured, so far as the particular British *casus belli* is concerned, and that we are being dragged on by our Allies into a continuation of the war in order to secure the special aspiration, say, of France, or Russia, or Italy, in which we have no direct concern or interest. Let me observe, in passing, that we are equally pledged to the re-constitution and independence of Serbia, and so far as I am aware, no German propaganda here has even suggested that the German Government is prepared to concede anything to this demand. But I wish to declare on behalf of the Government of Great Britain, without hesitation or reserve, that the Allies are fighting for a common cause; that for the purposes of the war, their interests are our interests, as we believe that our interests are theirs; and that a victory which will secure them all is, in our judgment, the essential condition of a lasting, enduring peace.

In the Allied countries, and particularly perhaps in Russia, the method of the German propagandist is just the reverse. There we are represented as the Power which is anxious to continue the war and to prevent the possibility either of a separate or a general peace. We are held out as lending money to the Allies on usurious terms, as making huge profits out of the munitions and other commodities which we supply and out of the shipping in which they are carried; as fulfilling the traditional rôle ascribed to us more than 100 years ago by Napoleon as 'a nation of hucksters and shopkeepers,' as exploiting without scruple or measure the necessities of our brother-combatants. It is difficult for us here to imagine that this can be regarded as a plausible or even a credible hypothesis—for us, who know with such bitter knowledge what the war actually means to us day by day, the upheaval of our whole

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[1] The peace terms submitted by the German Government to President Wilson at the end of this year included demands for a new boundary which would "protect Germany and Poland against Russia, strategically and economically" for "guarantees assuring Germany's safety from Belgium which would have to be reached by negotiation with the Belgian Government" without intervention by the Allies, and for financial compensation and indemnification as the condition of restoring French territory.

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national life, the absorption and extinction of thousands of millions of accumulated and prospective wealth, the tribute which almost every family among us is paying in precious lives, of hopes hardly yet in blossom or in their earliest flower, in the unceasing and pitiless drain upon our reservoir of potential promise and vitality. Who has greater reason than we have to long and to pray for peace?

Peace, yes; but on one condition only—that the war, with its waste and sacrifices, its untold sufferings, and undying examples of courage and unselfishness, shall not have been in vain. There can be no question of any separate peace. And the peace when it comes, be it soon, or be it late—and I will not disguise from you for a moment my convictions that the struggle will tax all our resources and our whole stock of patience and resolve—the peace when it comes must be such as will build upon a sure and stable foundation the security of the weak, the liberties of Europe, and a free future for the world."

The Lansdowne memorandum nevertheless played into the hands of Asquith's critics and opponents within the Government. They accepted its despondent view of the situation and drew from it the conclusion not that peace should be sought, but that the conduct of the War should be changed. In the meantime, the idea that there was an atmosphere of "defeatism" in the Cabinet was subtly exploited by certain newspapers to discredit the Prime Minister.

III

All these things, exaggerated, distorted, worked up day by day and presented to an anxious public by a group of hostile newspapers, undermined confidence in the Government and in Asquith's leadership. Of all the eminent men of his time he was least equipped to meet the form of attack to which he was now exposed, and he had no one in his immediate surroundings to set the stage or prompt him to what Lord Robert Cecil called "some big stroke"—such a stroke as when, after the Curragh incident, he decided to take the War Office into his own hands.

Histrionic self-assertion—playing up or playing down to the jury—had never been Asquith's métier, whether at the Bar or in public life. For twenty years and more mastery over the House of Commons had been the source of his power; and he was now to pay the penalty of being a great Parliamentarian when Parliament was on the wane. The House of Commons in November 1916 was nearly six years old; it had been elected on entirely different issues from those which now dominated the public mind; it had watched passively while the Government of its choice had been changed out of recognition, and had of necessity accepted almost everything that

Ministers proposed to it. It had been prolonged by its own act for successive short terms beyond its statutory period, and could come to no agreement about the basis on which the next election should take place. All questions touching this basis had been passed over to a Conference which met, under the chairmanship of the Speaker, at the end of September, and pending their settlement the existing House became more and more a survival, living on to avoid the inconvenience of a General Election, offering a platform for snipers, but lacking cohesion and leadership for any consistent support or criticism of the Government.

A man who had a keener eye to his own position might have devoted himself in these years to keeping Parliament alive as his own instrument and his defence when in difficulty with his colleagues, but Asquith's whole time and thought had been absorbed by the War and his Parliamentary duties had fallen into the background. Moreover recriminations in Parliament in war-time were extremely distasteful to him, and the idea of transferring Cabinet quarrels to the floor of the House was one that never crossed his mind.

But for this he paid. As the power of Parliament waned, all manner of outside influences gained strength. This was the opportunity of crowd-compellers, mob-orators, groups of newspapers concentrating their attacks upon individuals who had no effective means of replying. In ordinary times the attacks which now fell upon Asquith would have been met by a rally of his party to his support, and their violence and unfairness would have led to a corresponding reaction. In these times, with parties in suspense and party machinery dismantled, no such reply was possible, and Asquith himself, as leader of the Coalition, would have been the first to put his veto upon any partisan effort to espouse his cause. But he was more and more moving in a world which was unfamiliar to him. It was a world seething with ambitions and discontents, hungry for some new thing, despising the conventions and proprieties which to Asquith were the essence of good government, clamouring for "push and go" in place of the patient persistence which it called "wait and see." The men of this world acted in ways that were mysterious and inexplicable to him, and when he received warnings of their doings, he either dismissed them as the inventions of mischief-makers, or said frankly that, if they were true, he had no desire to defend himself.

During November all Fleet Street was buzzing with the plans being laid for his discomfiture, and taking advantage of old friendship and the confidence with which he had always treated me on critical occasions, I myself went to him several times during these weeks, and begged him to be on his guard. I tried to put it to him that this time he was faced with something more than the ordinary Press attacks which he had grown to despise, that there was in fact a concerted movement with important backing within his own Government to displace him and change the conduct of affairs. These efforts were useless. He said he was sick of all this gossiping and whispering and was determined to take no notice of it. He admitted that he was aware of the friction between certain of his colleagues, and added rather impatiently that he would be grateful to them if they would learn to take a more charitable view of each other, and leave him out of their disputes. For the rest, there was nothing to be done, even if what I said was true. The Cabinet had done everything possible to meet the demands for organisation and co-ordination. It had decided to appoint a "Food-Controller" and would probably set up a Ship-Control; it had its Man-power Board, and was discussing means of bringing most civilian activities under a more intelligent direction. All these things were good, but the winning of the war still depended mainly on the commanders and soldiers in the field. He was confident about that, provided certain cardinal mistakes were avoided, but plainly sceptical about what a Prime Minister or any Minister could do to expedite the event, beyond keeping the armies in the field reinforced and supplied, and avoiding cardinal mistakes. More than ever he dismissed the short cuts and new departures demanded by the impatient, as so many ways of losing the war.

All this played into the hands of his enemies who were calling for drama and initiative, and saying more and more openly that these things could only be provided by clearing out "the old gang" and bringing new and younger men on the scene.

CHAPTER L

ARTS AND STRATAGEMS

"Running for blood"—An atmosphere of uncertainty—Arts and stratagems—Mr. Bonar Law's opinion of Asquith—His alarms about his own position—Lord Beaverbrook's testimony—The conversion of Mr. Bonar Law—The Nigerian debate and its consequences—Comings and goings behind the scenes—The reluctance of Unionist Ministers—Mr. Lloyd George's proposals—Asquith's reply—Mr. Montagu's warning—Cross purposes and conflicting evidence—An ambiguous resolution—The demand for resignation—Lord Curzon's letters—Further parleys with Mr. Lloyd George—The effort at reconstruction—The *Times* article—Correspondence with Mr. Lloyd George—Asquith's refusal—Change in the attitude of Unionist Ministers—Resignation. J. A. S.

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On 14th November Asquith went to Paris and for the next two days was engaged in conferences with M. Poincaré, M. Briand, and others about the plans for the coming year. A more suspicious man would have realised before he started on this journey that he had left behind him enemies and critics who, as Lord Robert Cecil had said were, "running for blood." All the little ragged ends of administration which accompany government at all times were now being added up behind his back into a cumulative account and attributed to his dilatoriness and indecision. Undoubtedly the Coalition machinery was creaking, but some of its members seemed more bent on proving its deficiencies than on mending them. An atmosphere of uncertainty was created which made decision difficult and encouraged waverers to wait on events. Eminent men when asked to lend their aid hesitated and postponed, as if aware that the tenure of the Government was precarious. The Lansdowne memorandum had given the critics the opportunity of saying that the war would be lost unless a new spirit was infused into the Government, and the General Staff had been encouraged to improve the occasion by putting in a reply which inferentially conveyed the same moral. Sir William Robertson has related[1] how Asquith at once made terms with the demand of the military members of the Army Council for a larger supply of men for the year 1917, but this did not prevent his enemies from suggesting that he was opposing the proper development of "man-power."

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[1] *Soldiers and Statesmen*, I, p. 304.

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It is now known, though it was only surmised at the time that during the last fortnight of November, Mr. Lloyd George and Sir Edward Carson, aided by Lord Beaverbrook and Lord Northcliffe, were engaged on a definite plan for taking the conduct of the war out of Asquith's hands, and giving it the "new direction" which Mr. Lloyd George had so often advocated. A preparatory campaign had for some weeks been conducted in the Northcliffe press and other hostile newspapers which represented as apathy, lethargy, "waiting and seeing," the method which commended itself not only to Asquith but to the General Staffs, both French and British, and under Carson's leadership this had made some progress in the House of Commons. But within the Government and with the great majority in Parliament Asquith's position was still a strong one at the end of November, and with very few exceptions, his colleagues, both Liberal and Unionist, were impatient of Mr. Lloyd George and his schemes.

The arts and stratagems by which this situation was reversed in less than three weeks form one of the most curious chapters in British political history, and the candour with which their methods have been avowed by certain of the principal actors enables the course of events to be traced in considerable detail. Summarily it may be said that the operation consisted in detaching Mr. Bonar Law and the Unionist Ministers of the Coalition from Asquith and carrying them completely round the circle from mistrust and suspicion of Mr. Lloyd George to co-operation with him.

Mr. Bonar Law had long been uneasy, not about Asquith's leadership, but about the behaviour of certain malcontents in the House of Commons. Mr. John Redmond has left a record of a conversation which he had with him in March of this year, and which shows his state of mind at that time and the beginnings of subsequent developments:

Mar. 15, 1916.

I had occasion to-day to call upon Mr. Bonar Law in connection with a matter touching the Government of New South Wales.

When I had concluded my conversation on this topic, Mr. Bonar Law requested me to remain and to talk with him over the political situation.

He said he was convinced that the present political situation could not continue, that the Government might be beaten at any moment in the House of Commons, and that he was quite certain that if there was anyone to lead an Opposition, they would be driven from office in a very short time.

He said that if Sir Edward Carson had the health and the desire to take up such a position, he was quite sure he could drive the Government from office in no time.

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I asked him if he had any solution in his mind. He said no, no complete solution; that, if this Government were overthrown an almost exactly similar Government and not a better one would take its place.

He said he did not regard a general election as a possibility. He thought that when the eight months extension of the life of the Parliament expired, there would be a renewal; but that was a fairly long way off; and he feared a very early development.

I pressed him to know what he meant, and he then said that what he anticipated, and indeed what he feared, was that some sort of another reshuffle in the Government was necessary, and could not long be avoided.

I asked him if he meant by this that Asquith should go.

He said that his own personal opinion was, that Asquith was by far the best man for the position and that the idea which was abroad that he was vacillating and hesitating on any matters of war policy was quite untrue. His vacillations and hesitations only concerned questions of Parliamentary strategy. Although this was his personal opinion, he said he foresaw that Asquith probably would go.

I asked him who could possible take his place. Was it Carson? He said No, that would be impossible, even if Carson's health were good. I asked him, was it himself? He again said No, and added that he thought he had become to some extent unpopular in his own party.

He then said Mr. Lloyd George. I asked him what he thought of such an arrangement, and with an expressive gesture he said, "You know George as well as I do."

He seemed very depressed about the whole affair.

Mr. Bonar Law's alarms about the House of Commons proved groundless during the subsequent months, and in spite of his alleged deficiency in Parliamentary strategy, Asquith proved as equal to that part of his business as at any time in his Parliamentary career. But Mr. Bonar Law's misgivings about his own position steadily increased, and appear to have come to a climax in the Nigerian debate of 8th November, when Sir Edward Carson carried a large number of Unionists into the Lobby for an amendment proposing that enemy property in Nigeria should be sold only to "natural-born British subjects or Companies wholly British, instead of, as the Government maintained, and as Mr. Bonar Law himself argued, that the bidding should be open to allies and neutrals as well. This seemed to Mr. Bonar Law a very alarming event, and the more so as Mr. Lloyd George had not attended the Division. He seems to have drawn the inference that Sir Edward Carson and Mr. Lloyd George were acting together and in such a way as to undermine his position in the Unionist Party, and to alienate Unionist members from the Government.

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Lord Beaverbrook, who has supplied what professes to be the most intimate and authentic account yet published of the subsequent course of events,[1] has advanced two theories in regard to Asquith. First that, if he had not "deliberately depressed Bonar Law's position by giving all the important offices in his Government to Liberals," and if "from the very start he had treated Bonar Law not as simply one of a group of Ministers but as a partner or co-equal, he could have prolonged the life of his Ministry indefinitely."[2] Second that it was a patriotic necessity to remove Asquith from office in December 1916. The two theories are rather perilously held together by the suggestion that the defects of Asquith's War Administration "could have been rectified by an Administrator of the Bonar Law type."

It may readily be conceded that the two men were not constituted to understand each other easily. Bonar Law was sensitive on points which seemed to Asquith altogether unimportant, and his fears and suspicions belonged to a party history and personal relationships which were outside Asquith's experience, and which he had supposed to have been suspended by the War. Asquith was undoubtedly more at his ease with men of his own tradition and upbringing—Balliol men like Lord Lansdowne and Lord Curzon—and he was supposed to have shown them a preference which was damaging to Bonar Law's position in his own party. Still more important, he had endeavoured to fuse the Coalition into a unity superseding its party origins; whereas Mr. Bonar Law had regarded it from the beginning as a temporary co-operation of parties which should carefully guard their separate identities and leave unprejudiced the position of the leaders within the separate folds. Whatever the explanation, there seems to be no doubt that Mr. Bonar Law felt aggrieved by the course of events, and that his state of mind after the Nigerian debate offered just the opportunity they needed to the more resolute persons who were now on the warpath against Asquith.

Lord Beaverbrook's narrative is that the slow and reluctant conversion of Mr. Bonar Law from the opinion which he had expressed to Mr. Redmond in March that Asquith was "by far the best man" for the conduct of the War to the conviction that his own safety, and finally the safety of the country, depended on his joining Sir Edward Carson and Mr. Lloyd George in their effort to depose Asquith. This process seems to have been effected not by events in the field—for beyond vague references to a change in the conduct of the War the argument appears scarcely to have touched that ground—but by a succession of personal appeals and inducements: appeals to his ambition, when it seemed to be flagging, reminders of the precariousness of his own position, and of the popular wrath supposed to be rising against the Government and those whom the public might hold responsible for its failures. Since they form part of Asquith's story and are stated on the authority of Mr. Bonar Law's most intimate friend, the various steps in this process must be briefly noted here.

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[1] *Politicians and the War*, by Lord Beaverbrook, Vol. II.
[2] *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 217.

On 14th November, a week after the Nigerian debate, Mr. Bonar Law is reported by Lord Beaverbrook as saying that, though the present state of things might be unsatisfactory, "least of all did it appear that to satisfy Lloyd George's aspirations was to supply the remedy." On that day the root difficulty (according to Lord Beaverbrook) "was that Bonar Law had formed the opinion that in matters of office and power Lloyd George was a self-seeker and a man who considered no interests but his own."[1] On 24th November, however, he was persuaded to give a half-support to the scheme which Mr. Lloyd George was hatching for a War Council[2] with himself at the head of it, and to consider his plan for getting rid of Sir William Robertson, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, whom he considered to be the great obstacle to his schemes, by sending him on a mission to St. Petersburg. From this Mr. Bonar Law proceeded to a meeting with Mr. Lloyd George and Sir Edward Carson at the Hyde Park Hotel, but came away "still hostile to Lloyd George" and convinced that "his plans boiled down to one simple proposal to put Asquith out and to put himself in."

On Saturday, 25th November, Mr. Bonar Law saw Asquith, and to the annoyance of his friend, Lord Beaverbrook, revealed to him Mr. Lloyd George's scheme, and was somewhat unsettled by an appeal to loyalty which Asquith appears to have made to him.

[1] *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 127.

[2] At this stage the plans of Sir Edward Carson and Mr. Lloyd George already included the suggestion that Asquith should be President while Mr. Lloyd George was to be Chairman of the proposed War Council of four. The form was to be that of an announcement to the public by Asquith that he had for various reasons decided to appoint a "civilian General Staff" of which he was to be President, and Mr. Lloyd George Chairman, but which was not to be attended by the Chief of the Imperial General Staff or the First Sea Lord. *Politicians and the War*, II, 146. Asquith's Presidency was to be quite nominal, for Mr. Lloyd George said quite frankly "that Asquith must not be a member of the projected War Council." *Ibid.*, p. 142.

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Asquith has left no record of this interview, and there is no copy among his papers of the letter to Mr. Bonar Law in which he delivered his answer on Monday, the 27th. That must be given here in the form in which Lord Beaverbrook has printed it :

Asquith to Mr. Bonar Law.

THE WHARF,
SUTTON COURTNEY,
BERKS.
(written on) *Nov.* 25, 1916.

MY DEAR BONAR LAW,

What follows is intended for your eyes alone.

I fully realise the frankness and loyalty with which you have put forward the proposal embodied in your paper note. But under present conditions, and in the form in which it is presented, I do not see my way to adopt it.

I take a less disparaging view than you do of the War Committee. There is undoubtedly too much talk and consequent waste of time, but the Committee has done and is doing very valuable work, and is thrashing out difficult problems. I am quite open to suggestions for its improvement, whether in composition or in procedure. I may say, however, that I do not see how any body of the kind can be really workable unless the heads of the War Office and Admiralty are members of it. Our recent practice of sitting a good deal without the experts is a change for the better, and might perhaps be further developed.

But the essence of your scheme is that the War Committee should disappear, and its place be taken by a body of four—myself, yourself, Carson and Lloyd George.

As regards Carson, for whom, as you know, I have the greatest personal regard, I do not see how it would be possible, in order to secure his services, to pass over Balfour, or Curzon, or McKenna, all of whom have the advantage of intimate knowledge of the secret history of the last twelve months. That he should be admitted over their heads at this stage to the inner circle of the Government is a step which, I believe, would be deeply resented, not only by them and by my political friends, but by almost all your Unionist colleagues. It would be universally believed to be the price paid for shutting the mouth of our most formidable parliamentary critic—manifest sign of weakness and cowardice.

As to Mr. Lloyd George, you know as well as I do both his qualities and his defects. He has many qualities that would fit him for the first place, but he lacks the one thing needful—he does not inspire trust. . . . Here again, there is one construction, and one only, that could be put on the new arrangement—that it has been engineered by him with the purpose, not perhaps at the moment, but as soon as a fitting pretext could be found, of his displacing me.

In short, the plan could not, in my opinion, be carried out without fatally impairing the confidence of loyal and valued colleagues, and undermining my own authority.

I have spoken to you with the same frankness that you use to me, and which I am glad to say has uniformly marked our relations ever since the Coalition was formed. Nor need I tell you that, if I thought it right, I have every temptation (especially now) to seek relief from the intolerable daily burdens of labour and anxiety. 1916 Age 64

Yours very sincerely,
H. H. ASQUITH.

Lord Beaverbrook describes the state of mind of the triumvirate on the receipt of this letter (27th November). In the view of Mr. Lloyd George and Sir Edward Carson, "if Asquith would accept the titular rôle, well and good; if not, he must go." But Mr. Bonar Law would not go as far as this. "He was restrained by a feeling of loyalty to the head of the Government and was anxious to run Lloyd George and Asquith in harness together." In the meantime the Press was being mobilised against Asquith; the *Morning Post*, under the influence of Sir Edward Carson, had already declared Mr. Lloyd George to be the necessary man, and Lord Beaverbrook addressed himself to Lord Northcliffe, who, though bitterly hostile to Asquith, was, he tells us, not at the moment on the best terms with Mr. Lloyd George. By his efforts the two men seem to have been brought together. While this was preparing, it fell to Mr. Bonar Law to divulge the scheme to his Unionist colleagues, who till that moment had been entirely ignorant of what was going on. He did so on 27th November, with the result that "he found himself confronted with the uncompromising resistance of all his old colleagues," who "saw in the whole plan simply a scheme for the further aggrandisement of Lloyd George, and were absolutely determined not to proclaim a dictatorship with Lloyd George as dictator." Lord Lansdowne wrote the next day to Mr. Bonar Law, "The meeting in your room yesterday left a nasty taste in my mouth. . . . I think we all of us owe it to Asquith to avoid any action which might be regarded by him as a concerted attempt to oust him from his position as leader." Mr. Walter Long also wrote in the same sense.

Mr. Bonar Law seems to have wavered again as the result of this meeting, but at the critical moment a new argument was brought into play. It was now put to him that Asquith and Lord Lansdowne were working together for an inconclusive negotiated peace. Lord Lansdowne's memorandum was in the possession of the Cabinet and his letter espousing Asquith's cause enabled that suggestion to be made with an air of plausibility, though there was in fact no foundation for it whatever. "On that Saturday" (2nd December, two days after the first Conservative meeting) "the world," says Lord

1916 Age 64 Beaverbrook, "was menaced with the prospect of a peace which would have left a militant Prussia still unchained. But the triumph of Lloyd George and Bonar Law spelt Peace with Victory." On the same day Mr. Lloyd George wrote to Mr. Bonar Law, "The life of the country depends on resolute action by you now." This seems to have convinced Mr. Bonar Law, and he went to the second Conservative meeting held on the Sunday, 3rd December, determined to insist on the supersession of Asquith in the conduct of the War. Starting with his alarms about his own position and his hostility to Mr. Lloyd George, he had now, in less than three weeks, reached the point at which he was prepared to face the hostility of his party in support of Mr. Lloyd George's claim to be supreme in the conduct of the War. How the War was to be conducted, what change Mr. Lloyd George proposed to make, and what were the grounds of his differences with Sir William Robertson and the General Staff which formed a large part of his discontent, were questions which no one seems to have asked. It was simply assumed that Mr. Lloyd George was the man to save the country and "win the War," and both he and the politicians supporting him appear to have convinced themselves that it was their patriotic duty to place him in a position to perform these services.

III

It is necessary to go back a little to understand the sequence of events. On Wednesday, 29th November, the question of the organisation for war was discussed in the Cabinet, and a general view, in which Asquith concurred, was expressed that some change was necessary. The particular proposal which then found favour was that the War Committee should be relieved by the formation of a second committee to deal with the domestic aspects of war policy, which did not directly bear on the conduct of the War. This was favoured by many Unionist Ministers and had been in fact the alternative proposed by them at the party meeting two days earlier, at which Mr. Bonar Law had propounded the Lloyd George plan. But before it could be seriously considered Mr. Lloyd George went in person to Asquith on 1st December, and presented his own plan in a series of propositions :

1. That the War Committee consist of three members, two of which must be the First Lord of the Admiralty, and the Secretary of State for War, who should have in their offices deputies capable of attending to and deciding all Departmental business, and a third Minister without a portfolio. One of these three to be Chairman.

2. That the War Committee should have full power subject to the supreme control of the Prime Minister to direct all questions connected with the War.

3. The Prime Minister in his discretion to have power to refer any question to the Cabinet.

4. Unless the Cabinet on reference by the Prime Minister reverses the decision of the War Committee, that decision to be carried out by the Department concerned.

5. The War Committee to have the power to invite any Minister and to summon the expert advisers and officers of any Department to its meetings.

Later in the same day Asquith wrote to Mr. Lloyd George:

Asquith to Mr. Lloyd George.

Dec. 1, 1916.

MY DEAR LLOYD GEORGE,

I have now had time to reflect on our conversation this morning and to study your memorandum.

Though I do not altogether share your dark estimate and forecast of the situation, actual and prospective, I am in complete agreement that we have reached a critical situation in the War, and that our methods of procedure, with the experience that we have gained during the last three months, call for reconsideration and revision.

The two main defects of the War Committee, which has done excellent work, are (1) that its numbers are too large, and (2) that there is delay, evasion and often obstruction on the part of the Departments in giving effect to its decisions.

I might with good reason add (3) that it is often kept in ignorance by the Departments of information, essential and even vital, of a technical kind, upon the problems that come before it; and (4) that it is overcharged with duties, many of which might well be delegated to subordinate bodies.

The result is that I am clearly of opinion that the War Committee should be reconstituted, and its relations to and authority over the Departments be more clearly defined and more effectively asserted. I come now to your specific proposals.

In my opinion, whatever changes are made in the composition or functions of the War Committee, the Prime Minister must be its Chairman. He cannot be relegated to the position of an arbiter in the background or a referee to the Cabinet.

In regard to its composition, I agree that the War Secretary and the First Lord of the Admiralty are necessary members. I am inclined to add to the same category the Minister of Munitions. There should be another member, either with or without portfolio, or charged only with comparatively light departmental duties. One of the members should be appointed Vice-Chairman.

I purposely in this letter do not discuss the delicate and difficult question of personnel.

The Committee should as far as possible, sit *de die in diem*, and have

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full power to see that its decisions (subject to appeal to the Cabinet) are carried out promptly and effectively by the Departments.

The reconstruction of the War Committee should be accompanied by the setting up of a Committee of National Organisation, to deal with the purely domestic side of our problems. It should have executive power within its own domain.

The Cabinet would in all cases have ultimate authority.

Yours always sincerely,
H. H. Asquith.

Asquith has left no record of what passed at his interview with Mr. Lloyd George, but he was undoubtedly of opinion as the result of it that accommodation was possible and that no very serious crisis was pending. In this mood he went away on Saturday, 2nd December, to Walmer for the week-end.

But on the same day Mr. Edwin Montagu, the junior colleague with whom he was most intimate, saw Mr. Lloyd George and immediately afterwards wrote the following letter to Asquith :

Mr. Montagu to Asquith.

"The situation is probably irretrievably serious. I have just come from Ll. G., with whom I have spent an hour of hard fighting, but it seems to me to be of no avail, and I fear he has committed himself, though there is always a chance. . . .

He regards it as essential that the small War Committee should sit so frequently and act with such rapidity that the P.M., whoever he were, ought not to have a place upon it, but he is loud in his assertions that you are the right Prime Minister in the right place. He will not budge from this position, and I cannot do anything more. . . .

The speeches that he will make will, in my opinion, not only make it impossible for the Government to carry on, but will plunge this country into recrimination and public debate in the face of the enemy which will hearten them up, and shake to its foundations the Alliance. Added to this, I think it would be quite impossible if Lloyd George and Derby go—and they are going together—for Bonar Law to remain.

The Government will break up on matters of machinery, but the argument will be that through that very machinery, the situation in Rumania, Serbia, etc. has resulted, and even the financial situation ; and it will be said that the Government was broken up deliberately by Ll. G. and his friends because they saw no prospect of improvement—and curiously enough on this side of the question he will be supported by the soldiers who have been suborning the Press."[1]

Asquith returned to Downing Street the next morning (Sunday, 3rd December), and on the same morning the Unionist members of the Cabinet (with the exception of Lord Lansdowne, who was not summoned, and Mr. Balfour, who was ill) met at Mr. Bonar Law's house. In the meantime the Sabbath peace had been rudely disturbed by a noisy article in Reynolds' newspaper which, in Lord Beaverbrook's words, "was like an interview with Lloyd George written in the third person, and looked on the surface as if it was directly inspired." It said that he was prepared to resign, if his terms were not granted, and that he would then appeal to public opinion against the Government for mismanaging the War. It said that he was in active alliance with Sir Edward Carson, that Mr. Bonar Law would probably resign with him, and that Lord Derby was starting along the same road. There seems to be no doubt that the appearance of this article greatly incensed the Unionist leaders who considered it, in Lord Beaverbrook's words, "a monstrous breach of confidence taking the form of a public threat to them in the middle of a delicate negotiation." Thus when they met on the Sunday morning they were very angry with Mr. Lloyd George, to whom rightly or wrongly they attributed the inspiration of this article. The situation, they said, was impossible, and it must be ended.

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[1] This apparently is an allusion to the supposed activities of certain soldiers in stirring the Press against the Government on the subject of "man-power."

But from this point onwards the memories of what happened are confused and uncertain, and most of those who attended the meeting appear to have carried away conflicting impressions of what they themselves or their colleagues intended. Lord Beaverbrook's account, presumably supplied to him by Mr. Bonar Law, is that their tone at this meeting changed from "one of passive hostility to Lloyd George's plan to an active determination to force an issue and compel Lloyd George to accept the domination of the Prime Minister or retire from the Government."—"It became rapidly apparent," he says, "that Bonar Law stood alone. Opposed to him sat the whole array of the Tory leaders—Lord Curzon, Austen Chamberlain, Lord Robert Cecil, Walter Long, etc. The dominant note of the meeting was hostility to Lloyd George and his plans for organising a War Council."

Others who were present think this account to be too highly coloured. Their recollection is that, while they were scandalised by Mr. Lloyd George's proceedings and the communication of his intentions to the Press, they thought the issue between him and Asquith to be one which should be fought out between Liberal Ministers, and that, however reluctant they might have been to serve under Mr. Lloyd George, they did not cut themselves off from doing so if he should win in the encounter with Asquith and his Liberal colleagues. This attitude was not on the face of it a very

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helpful one, for the question at issue was not whether Asquith would obtain the support of his Liberal colleagues—there never was the slightest doubt about that—but whether he or Mr. Lloyd George would secure the adhesion of the Unionist Ministers.

Yet a third account, which cuts across both the others and is difficult to reconcile with any of the evidence or the subsequent course of events, is supplied in a letter from Lord Curzon to Lord Lansdowne published in the latter's biography.[1] Writing on the day of the meeting (3rd December) Lord Curzon said:

Lord Curzon to Lord Lansdowne.

Confidential. *Dec. 3rd*, 1916.

I am sorry that you could not be present at the meeting at Bonar Law's, which is just over.

It is a long story. For a fortnight *pourparlers* have been going on between Lloyd George and the Prime Minister, in which Bonar Law (without telling us) has taken a prominent part.

The letters were read to us just now. Practically, Lloyd George issued an ultimatum to the Prime Minister, putting the latter in the complete background, and constituting a War Committee of three, under himself.

The Prime Minister refused, and stuck to the arrangement (of two Committees) mentioned at the last Cabinet and agreed to at our last meeting in Bonar Law's room, with himself as Chairman. Lloyd George, as the papers of yesterday and to-day will have shown you, has attempted to force the situation by announcing his own resignation, which is apparently to appear in the Press to-morrow. Derby is to resign with him, and Bonar Law has been so far implicated that his name appears with theirs in the papers, and he told us he meant to resign this afternoon.

We felt three things: (*a*) that this was unfair to the Prime Minister; (*b*) that it placed Lloyd George in a position where he could dictate his terms; (*c*) that Bonar Law ought not to act independently, but that we ought both to think and act unitedly. Accordingly, it was unanimously decided that Bonar Law should see the Prime Minister early this afternoon (he has been summoned back from Walmer, whither, with characteristic nonchalance, he had slipped away yesterday evening); that Bonar Law should tell him that in our opinion the events to which I have referred had rendered internal reconstruction no longer possible; that he (Asquith) should this afternoon place his resignation in the hands of the King (including, of course, ours); and that if he was not able to take that step, we placed the whole of our resignations in his hands.

All our colleagues were at the meeting except A.J.B., who is in bed, and yourself.

The object of these tactics, which are, in my opinion, fundamentally sound and essential, is this:

When the Prime Minister resigns, the King will send for Lloyd George. The latter will then, for the first time, be confronted with the difficulties of the situation. He will cease to be a merely destructive and disloyal force. He will have to make terms with the Prime Minister and with all the rest of us. He will soon find out what is the attitude of the Irishmen, the Labour men, and so on. His Government will be dictated to him by others, not shaped exclusively by himself.

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[1] *Life of Lord Lansdowne*, pp. 452–453.

For instance, no one of us would accept a dictatorship of Carson and himself. The following, both in House of Commons and country, of the Prime Minister will become apparent, and Lloyd George will have to make terms with them. In other words, he will for the first time have the responsibilities of his action in breaking up the Government.

In passing, I may say that he does not mean to have Balfour at any cost, and I suppose the majority of the present Government are doomed to disappearance.

Had one felt that reconstitution by and under the present Prime Minister was possible, we should all have preferred to try it. But we know that with him as Chairman, either of the Cabinet or War Committee, it is absolutely impossible to win the War,[1] and it will be for himself and Lloyd George to determine whether he goes out altogether or become Lord Chancellor or Chancellor of the Exchequer in a new Government, a nominal Premiership being a protean compromise which, in our view, could have no endurance.

In the end the Unionist Ministers passed a resolution which was capable of being interpreted in two, if not more, senses:

"We share the view expressed to the Prime Minister by Mr. Bonar Law some time ago that the Government cannot go on as it is.

It is evident that a change must be made, and in our opinion the publicity given to the intentions of Mr. Lloyd George makes reconstruction from within no longer possible.

We therefore urge the Prime Minister to tender the resignation of the Government.

If he feels unable to take that step we authorise Mr. Bonar Law to tender our resignation."

Lord Beaverbrook who, as he tells us, was waiting in an adjoining room, and to whom Mr. Bonar Law had recourse, while he was pondering the resolution, explains that Mr. Bonar Law accepted it in one sense and his Unionist colleagues in another. They laid their stress on the second paragraph which without mentioning his name was intended to censure Mr. Lloyd George for his supposed communications to the Press; he laid his stress on the third, which called for Asquith's resignation. *They* meant the Prime Minister's resignation to be the first step towards bringing Mr. Lloyd George under control; *he* meant it to be the prelude to the Prime Minister's

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[1] If this was Lord Curzon's considered opinion, he had kept Asquith entirely in the dark about it. Asquith had supposed Lord Curzon to be among his most loyal supporters in the Cabinet, and (as appears from Lord Beaverbrook's narrative) he had given offence to Mr. Bonar Law by the preference which he was supposed to have shown Lord Curzon.

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deposition. His friend tells us that Mr. Bonar Law pondered it deeply and came to this conclusion.

> "He had already told the Prime Minister that he would resign if Lloyd George's demands were not granted. So—as he argued it to himself—all he was asked to do was to subscribe in written form to a simple threat of resignation which he had already made in words. The resolution on the face of it committed no one of the signatories either to Asquith or Lloyd George."[1]

This narrative, which bears the stamp of truth, disposes of Lord Curzon's account, in so far as that implies an agreement among Unionist Ministers that "the object of their tactics" was to depose Asquith and make Mr. Lloyd George Prime Minister. Had there been any such agreement, the casuistry which Lord Beaverbrook attributes to Mr. Bonar Law would have been entirely unnecessary. In that case he would have won his point and no mental reserve would have been required of him. The communication to Asquith would have been that which he desired to make and he would presumably have made it in the most explicit terms. On the other hand, if the sense of the Unionist meeting was what Lord Beaverbrook represents it to have been, it was plainly Mr. Bonar Law's duty to convey to Asquith not merely what was "on the face" but what was the real meaning and intention of the resolution. He would, in that case, have produced the resolution and said: "My Conservative colleagues believe in you and desire you to have not less but more power. They do not believe in Mr. Lloyd George, whom they think to be trafficking with the Press and seeking his own advancement. The object of the course suggested in the resolution is to reduce Mr. Lloyd George's position and to enhance yours. I, Bonar Law, do not agree with them, but in this I am alone. In the light of what I have told you you must make up your mind whether to concede Mr. Lloyd George's demands for further power or to resist them."

When he saw Asquith on the Sunday afternoon after the Unionist meeting Mr. Bonar Law did neither of these things. He neither told him that the Unionist Ministers intended to get rid of him in order to make Mr. Lloyd George Prime Minister (Lord Curzon's version) nor explained to him that they desired his resignation as a means of enhancing his power and bringing Mr. Lloyd George under control (Lord Beaverbrook's version). More unfortunate still, he did not produce the resolution. Asquith's testimony is conclusive about that, for in publishing it in his book *Memories and Reflections* he describes the resolution as that "which was passed by the Unionist

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[1] *Politicians and the War*, II, p. 213.

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Ministers on Sunday, 3rd December, but was not shown to me by Mr. Bonar Law."[1] Lord Beaverbrook, as he tells us in his book, had taken an alarmist view of the effect of the second paragraph of the resolution—the paragraph reflecting on the publicity given to Mr. Lloyd George's plan—if it were shown to the Prime Minister. He need not have been alarmed, for it was not shown.

What then happened at the interview between Asquith and Mr. Bonar Law? The account cited and adopted by Asquith[2] is that given by Lord Crewe. "His (Mr. Bonar Law's) message was curtly delivered, but in further conversation it was implied that the demand of resignation was not made in Mr. Lloyd George's interest but that the Government might be reconstructed." Mr. Bonar Law, as his friend tells us, greatly resented the imputation that he had concealed anything from Asquith, and was sure that he had explained fully all the material facts as Lord Beaverbrook describes them, the attitude of the Unionist Ministers towards Mr. Lloyd George, their desire that he should be brought under control, etc. What is certain is that Asquith understood none of this. On the contrary he supposed himself to be threatened with a sudden and inexplicable abandonment by the Unionist Ministers who had hitherto supported him in his contentions with Mr. Lloyd George. Mr. Bonar Law seems to have suggested that Asquith was so alarmed and confused by the mere mention of the word "resignation" that he failed to take in the rest of his communication. Such an explanation can hardly be taken seriously by anyone who knew Asquith. If any man knew how to keep his head cool and his brain clear in an emergency of this kind, it was he.

But if, in the absence of any other clue, Asquith attached importance to the word "resignation" he was assuredly right. It was, as all accounts agree, resignation on which his enemies relied to obtain their end. He knew, as Mr. Bonar Law knew (although somewhat surprisingly the majority of Unionist Ministers appear not to have known), that there is a world of difference between "resignation" and "reconstruction." Reconstruction in the sense in which some at least of the Unionist Ministers desired it, could quite well have proceeded as it did in 1915, by the resignation of all the Prime Minister's colleagues, while he himself retained his place. But resignation on the part of a Prime Minister is a confession of inability to carry on his Government, and practice and precedent require that he should stand aside while others endeavour to form the new Government. Asquith naturally assumed that those who required this step had considered what it implied, and it seemed to him a sudden desertion of himself, without warning and without cause, by all his Unionist colleagues. If he was wrong, Mr. Bonar Law did not succeed in undeceiving him. From this point of view the non-production of the resolution was fatal. Had it been produced, Asquith must have asked questions, the answers to which would either have revealed the true situation or led him to explore it for himself.

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[1] *Memories and Reflections*, II, p. 131. This testimony is reinforced by a contemporary note of Asquith's Secretary, Sir Maurice Bonham Carter.

[2] *Ibid.*, II, p. 138.

IV

A last word remains to be said about Lord Curzon's letter to Lord Lansdowne. Lord Curzon not only wrote to Lord Lansdowne, he also wrote on the following day to Asquith :

Lord Curzon to Asquith.

1 Carlton House Terrace,
Dec. 4th, 1916.

My dear Henry,

Lansdowne has, I think, explained to you that my resignation yesterday was far from having the sinister purport which I believe you were inclined to attribute to it. However, I have not written to emphasise that but to strike a note of gaiety in a world of gloom. Just now I recalled these lines of Matthew Arnold—I cannot remember in what poem :

We in some unknown Power's employ
Move in a rigorous line ;
Can neither when we will enjoy
Nor when we will resign.

We are hourly expecting you to facilitate the process by asking for our seals.

Yours ever,
Curzon.

If the two letters were not in evidence, it would scarcely seem possible that they were written by the same hand. The only "sinister purport," as Lord Curzon well knew, which Asquith was "inclined to attribute" to the threatened resignation of his Unionist colleagues, was that which Lord Curzon himself had attributed to it in his letter to Lord Lansdowne. If that was the real purport, the effect of such a communication made to Asquith on the Monday could only be to lull the intended victim into a false security.

The first sentence of this letter raises an important question. How could Lord Lansdowne have made the suggested reassuring explanation to Asquith, if he knew only what Lord Curzon had told him on the previous day ? 1916 Age 64

The answer can only be conjectured, but it seems probable that on returning to London from the country Lord Lansdowne saw other Unionist Ministers, and, after seeing them, gave Asquith this explanation. It is, in any case, evident that Lord Curzon's letter to Asquith was written after he had learnt that Lord Lansdowne had reassured Asquith ; and it may fairly be presumed that the explanation which Lord Lansdowne had given Asquith was generally in accord with the account which Mr. Bonar Law gave Lord Beaverbrook, and which the latter has published in his book.

The importance of this letter will be evident when we come to the events of the Monday, 4th December. Whatever happened on that day, there is no doubt that on the Sunday afternoon (3rd December) after his interview with Mr. Bonar Law, Asquith believed that his Unionist colleagues would no longer support him in resisting Mr. Lloyd George's demands. Acting on that belief he saw both Mr. Lloyd George and Mr. Bonar Law (for the second time) later in the afternoon, and once more explored the possibility of an accommodation with them without sacrificing his own position as Chief of the War Committee. There was the usual search for formulæ, and before the evening he supposed himself to have made such progress in this direction as to justify him in informing the King that the Government must be reconstructed, and drafting a notice to the Press to that effect. Lord Crewe, who dined in his company on the Sunday evening at Mr. Montagu's house, says in his narrative : " We separated with the hope, though with no assurance, that the resignation of all Ministers, as in the summer of 1915, might lead to the formation of a stable administration on a new principle."

This hope was short-lived, for in seeing Mr. Lloyd George and Mr. Bonar Law on that Sunday afternoon Asquith had unwittingly delivered himself into the hands of his enemies. It was now conveyed to Unionist Ministers that instead of accepting the advice which they supposed themselves to have offered him that he should resign and fight Mr. Lloyd George, Asquith proposed to stay and settle with him. At the same time and fortified by the same information, the hostile Press devoted itself to making the suggested settlement impossible by representing it as an abject and complete surrender by Asquith. The two things together decided the issue. The Unionists were alienated, and the door was now to be shut upon any accommodation which a self-respecting man could accept.

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On the Sunday evening, after he had seen Mr. Lloyd George and Mr. Bonar Law, Asquith had supposed that the chief difficulty would be not his own position—since that would be secured by giving him as Prime Minister the last word and final control—but the personnel of the proposed Council. Mr. Lloyd George had proposed, in addition to himself, Mr. Bonar Law, Sir Edward Carson, and a representative of Labour. To this Asquith objected that such a Council would be "absolutely inefficient" for the purpose of carrying on the War and he foresaw a very stiff battle on that point, but he was willing to defer it pending reconstruction. This was the general idea in his mind when he informed the King on the Sunday evening that reconstruction had become necessary. He thought still that he would be able to form a Government which would support him in exercising the supreme control over the War Council and in insisting that the personnel of that Council should be efficient for war purposes.

But on the following morning (Monday, 4th December) there appeared a leading article in *The Times* which Asquith interpreted as revealing the real intentions of the proponents of the War Council scheme. It was couched in deliberately insulting language, and the writer was evidently well informed of the confidential negotiations of the preceding three days. He knew what had passed up to the Sunday evening, not only in general terms but in exact detail. He knew that Asquith thought accommodation possible about his own position, but that he was taking strong objection to Mr. Bonar Law and Sir Edward Carson being two out of the three members of the proposed Council. He knew other things which Asquith thought could only be known to the very few to whom he had confided them in the previous two days. To sting Asquith into withdrawing his concession and to incite the others to persist to the last was evidently the motive of the article. Asquith's "conversion" was said to have been "swift," but "Mr. Asquith had never been slow to note the political tendencies when they became inevitable." Mr. Bonar Law was touched on his tenderest point, his relations with his party, and told that he had "a great opportunity of re-establishing a personal position which has perhaps been necessarily obliterated by recent events." The introduction of Sir Edward Carson was said to be "an essential part of Mr. Lloyd George's scheme of reform." "These two," said the writer, "have always been congenial associates. They have something of the same resolution and fighting

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instinct. It is not unnatural that the one should turn to the other at the moment when he is staking everything upon an offer to reorganise the direction of the War."[1] The article wound up with a eulogy of Mr. Lloyd George, whose "great position" was said to be "almost untouched by the general unpopularity of the Government." This, the reader was told, was by no means the first time that he had been on the verge of a rupture with his colleagues. Once it was averted by the enforced surrender of the Government over the Military Service Bill. "From the very beginning he has stood apart from the rest in his unmistakable enthusiasm for vigorous war."

There was no mistaking the meaning of this. Not only was Mr. Lloyd George to be entrusted with the direction of the War, but if Asquith remained Prime Minister, he was in future to be a mere figurehead and would immediately be taunted as having "surrendered."

Lord Beaverbrook has stated that Mr. Lloyd George did not inspire this article, but even if that were so, an article written plainly in his interest in a newspaper with the principal proprietor of which he was known to be in close touch was bound to appear to Asquith and other people as the expression of his mind. The circumstances also were extremely untoward. Asquith had learnt from what he believed to be a credible source that Lord Northcliffe had visited the War Office on the Sunday evening,[2] and the article was fully informed of what had happened on that day. No doubt this coloured the view that Asquith took of it, but the importance of the article lay not in the personal inspiration of any one individual, but in the undoubted fact that it conveyed the knowledge and expressed

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[1] Mr. Edwin Montagu writing the following day (5th December), put a somewhat different complexion on Mr. Lloyd George's insistence on Sir Edward Carson:

"I think his (Mr. Lloyd George's) main object was loyalty to Bonar Law, who had been working with him and who feels acutely the position in which his party is being split by Carson's rival leadership. Carson is leader of the Opposition, and at a time when you are reconstructing your Government, surely to make a new Coalition in order to help Bonar Law and the Parliamentary situation, it is not a very unknown thing to take in the most conspicuous Opposition leader."

[2] Apparently this was so, see *My Northcliffe Diary*, by Tom Clarke, pp. 105–106. "Dec. 3, 1916: The Chief returned to town after visiting his mother in the country, and at 7 o'clock he was at the War Office with Lloyd George." Lord Beaverbrook records two other interviews between Mr. Lloyd George and Lord Northcliffe in these days, one at the War Office on 1st December (*Politicians and the War*, p. 199), which was followed by an article in *The Times* "favourable to the cause of the revolters," and another on Saturday, 2nd December, after which the *Evening News* came out with posters "Lloyd George packing up." Much interesting information as to the manner in which Lord Northcliffe conducted his campaign against Asquith will be found in Mr. Clarke's Diary.

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the intentions of the group which was acting against him.[1] He concluded that it was their deliberate intention to make any accommodation impossible which left him with the power and authority of a Prime Minister.

After reading this article Asquith wrote to Mr. Lloyd George :

Asquith to Mr. Lloyd George.

10 Downing Street,
Dec. 4th, 1916.

My dear Lloyd George,

Such productions as the first leading article in to-day's *Times*, showing the infinite possibilities for misunderstanding and misrepresentation of such an arrangement as we considered yesterday, make me at least doubtful as to its feasibility. Unless the impression is at once corrected that I am being relegated to the position of an irresponsible spectator of the War, I cannot possibly go on.

The suggested arrangement was to the following effect :

The Prime Minister to have supreme and effective control of War policy.

The agenda of the War Committee will be submitted to him ; its Chairman will report to him daily ; he can direct it to consider particular topics or proposals ; and all its conclusions will be subject to his approval or veto. He can, of course, at his own discretion, attend meetings of the Committee.

Yours sincerely,
H. H. Asquith.

Mr. Lloyd George replied :

Mr. Lloyd George to Asquith.

War Office,
Whitehall,
Dec. 4th, 1916.

My dear Prime Minister,

I have not seen *The Times*' article. But I hope you will not attach undue importance to these effusions. I have had these misrepresentations to put up with for months. Northcliffe frankly wants a smash. Derby and I do not. Northcliffe would like to make this and any other arrangement under your Premiership impossible. Derby and

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[1] During November the War Office appears to have been the principal scene of these operations. Lord Beaverbrook being officer in charge of Canadian Records had a room there, and he records that Sir Reginald Brade, the Secretary to the War Office, frequently called on him. It was in this room that Lord Beaverbrook had an interesting interview with Lord Birkenhead who denounced the "intrigue" as dangerous to the public interest. "I argued," says Lord Beaverbrook, "that his own position would be perfectly safe under a new Administration, but the suggestion annoyed him." (*Politicians and the War*, II, p. 158.)

I attach great importance to your retaining your present position—effectively. I cannot restrain nor I fear influence Northcliffe. 1916 Age 64

I fully accept in letter and in spirit your summary of the suggested arrangement—subject of course to personnel.

Ever sincerely,
D. Lloyd George.

It will be seen that Mr. Lloyd George like Asquith himself, regarded the plan discussed on 1st December as merely a "suggested arrangement."

In spite of *The Times*' article Asquith went on with his plan of reconstruction without resignation and on the same morning (Monday, 4th December) saw the King, and after submitting the resignation of his colleagues received authority to form a new Government. When the House met in the afternoon he moved its adjournment until the 7th, pending the reconstruction of the Government. He then, after consulting his Liberal colleagues, wrote again to Mr. Lloyd George:

Asquith to Mr. Lloyd George.

10 Downing Street,
Dec. 4, 1916.

My dear Lloyd George,

Thank you for this letter of this morning. The King gave me to-day authority to ask and accept the resignation of all my colleagues, and to form a new Government on such lines as I should submit to him. I start therefore with a clean slate.

The first question which I have to consider is the constitution of the new War Committee.

After full consideration of the matter in all its aspects, I have come decidedly to the conclusion that it is not possible that such a Committee could be made workable and effective without the Prime Minister as its Chairman. I quite agree that it will be necessary for him, in view of the other calls upon his time and energy, to delegate from time to time the chairmanship to another Minister as his representative and locum-tenens; but (if he is to retain the authority which corresponds to his responsibility as Prime Minister) he must continue to be, as he has always been, its permanent President. I am satisfied on reflection that any other arrangement (such for instance as the one which I indicated to you in my letter of to-day) would be in experience impracticable and incompatible with the Prime Minister's final and supreme control.

The other question which you have raised relates to the personnel of the Committee. Here again after deliberate consideration I find myself unable to agree with some of your suggestions.

I think we both agree that the first Lord of the Admiralty must, of necessity, be a member of the Committee.

I cannot (as I told you yesterday) be a party to any suggestion that

1916 Age 64 Mr. Balfour should be displaced. The technical side of the Admiralty has been reconstituted with Sir John Jellicoe as First Sea Lord. I believe Mr. Balfour to be, under existing conditions, the necessary head of the Board.

I must add that Sir E. Carson (for whom personally and in every other way I have the greatest regard) is not, from the only point which is significant to me (namely the most effective prosecution of the War) the man best qualified among my colleagues, present and past, to be a member of the War Committee.

I have only to say, in conclusion, that I am strongly of opinion that the War Committee (without any disparagement of the existing Committee, which in my judgment is a most efficient body and has done and is doing, invaluable work) ought to be reduced in number; so that it can sit more frequently and overtake more easily the daily problems with which it has to deal. But in any reconstruction of the Committee, such as I have, and have for some time past had in view, the governing consideration to my mind is the special capacity of the men who are to sit on it for the work which it has to do.

That is a question which I must reserve for myself to decide.

Yours very sincerely,
H. H. Asquith,

Mr. Lloyd George replied the following day:

War Office,
Whitehall,
Dec. 5, 1916.

My dear Prime Minister,

I received your letter with some surprise. On Friday I made proposals which involved not merely your retention of the Premiership but the supreme control of the War, whilst the executive functions, subject to that supreme control, were left to others. I thought you then received these suggestions favourably. In fact you yourself proposed that I should be the Chairman of this Executive Committee, although as you know, I never put forward that demand. On Saturday you wrote me a letter in which you completely went back on that proposition. You sent for me on Sunday and put before me other proposals; These proposals you embodied in a letter written to me on Monday:

The Prime Minister to have supreme and effective control of War Policy;

The agenda of the War Committee will be submitted to him; its Chairman will report to him daily; he can direct it to consider particular topics or proposals; and all its conclusions will be subject to his approval or veto. He can, of course, at his own discretion attend meetings of the Committee.

These proposals safeguarded your position and power as Prime Minister in every particular. I immediately wrote you accepting them "in letter and in spirit." It is true that on Sunday I expressed views as to the constitution of the Committee, but these were for discussion. To-day you have gone back on your own proposals.

I have striven my utmost to cure the obvious defects of the War Committee without overthrowing the Government. As you are aware, on several occasions during the last two years I have deemed it my duty to express profound dissatisfaction with the Government's method of conducting the war. Many a time with the road to victory open in front of us, we have delayed and hesitated while the enemy were erecting barriers that finally checked our approach. There has been delay, hesitation, lack of forethought and vision. I have endeavoured repeatedly to warn the Government of the dangers both verbally and in written memoranda and letters, which I crave your leave to publish, if my action is challenged; but I have either failed to secure decisions or secured them too late to avert the evils. The latest illustration is our lamentable failure to give timely support to Rumania.

I have more than once asked to be relieved from my responsibility for a policy with which I was in thorough disagreement, but at your urgent personal request I remained in the Government. I realise that when the country is in the peril of a great war, Ministers have not the same freedom to resign on disagreement. At the same time, I have always felt—and felt deeply—that I was in a false position inasmuch as I could never defend in a whole-hearted manner the action of a Government of which I was a member. We have thrown away opportunity after opportunity, and I am convinced, after deep and anxious reflection, that it is my duty to leave the Government in order to inform the people of the real condition of affairs and to give them an opportunity before it is too late to save their native land from a disaster which is inevitable if the present methods are longer persisted in. As all delay is fatal in war, I place my office without further parley at your disposal.

It is with great personal regret that I have come to this conclusion. In spite of mean and unworthy insinuations to the contrary—insinuations which I fear are always inevitable in the case of men who hold prominent but not primary positions in any Administration—I have felt a strong personal attachment to you as my Chief. As you yourself said on Sunday, we have acted together for ten years and never had a quarrel, although we have had many a time a grave difference on questions of policy. You have treated me with great courtesy and kindness; for all that I thank you. Nothing would have induced me to part now except an overwhelming sense that the course of action which has been pursued has put the country—and not merely the country, but throughout the world the principles for which you and I have always stood through our political lives—in the greatest peril that has ever overtaken them.

As I am fully conscious of the importance of preserving national unity I propose to give your Government complete support in the vigorous prosecution of the war; but unity without action is nothing but futile carnage, and I cannot be responsible for that. Vigour and vision are the supreme need at this hour.

Yours sincerely,
D. Lloyd George.

On this letter Asquith has written: "I replied pointing out that I could not accept his version of what had taken place between us

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and that in particular he has omitted to quote the first and most material part of my letter of Monday" (i.e. the part relating to *The Times*' article). Asquith apparently added a caution against the publication of the correspondence or documents at this stage, for Mr. Lloyd George wrote again:

Mr. Lloyd George to Asquith.

Dec. 5.

MY DEAR PRIME MINISTER,

I cannot announce my resignation without assigning the reason. Your request that I should not publish the correspondence that led up to and necessitated it, places me therefore in an embarrassing and unfair position. I must give reasons for the grave step I have taken. If you forbid publication of the correspondence, do you object to my stating in another form my version of the causes that led to my resigning?

Ever sincerely,
D. LLOYD GEORGE.

As to the first part of your letter, the publication of the letters would cover the whole ground.

In his subsequent explanation at the Liberal Party meeting, Asquith met the charge that he had shifted his ground by pointing out that in his first letter of 4th December, he had been careful to say that "the suggested arrangement *was*," and that in this very letter he had told Mr. Lloyd George that the construction put upon it by *The Times* had shown its "infinite possibilities for misunderstanding and misrepresentation" and made him "doubtful as to its feasibility." The question of verbal consistency is of little importance. Everything up to this point had been provisional, and he was plainly entitled to withdraw, if he discovered that he and Mr. Lloyd George attached different meanings to what he had provisionally accepted—if, for example, Mr. Lloyd George meant what *The Times* said. To Asquith the one important point in these days was to discover what was in Mr. Lloyd George's mind when he proposed the reorganisation of the War Council. Lord Beaverbrook is clear on the point that Mr. Lloyd George's object was to take the control of the war out of Asquith's hands. ("If Asquith would accept the titular rôle, well and good; if not, he must go."[1]) Mr. Lloyd George, on the other hand, had written: "Derby and I attach great importance to your retaining your present position—effectively." (4th December.) By the evening of 5th December Asquith had come to the conclusion that there was no virtue in that word "effectively," and he was determined, as he said, not to remain Prime Minister and be "an irresponsible spectator of the war."

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[1] *Politicians and the War*, p. 157 (27th November).

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The correspondence had been carried to its close on Tuesday, 5th December, but other things happened on Monday, 4th December, besides the exchange of letters between Asquith and Mr. Lloyd George.

Undoubtedly on this Monday Asquith was led to believe that the attitude of Unionist Ministers towards him was far different from what he had understood from Mr. Bonar Law in their interview on the Sunday. Lord Crewe in the account adopted by Asquith and published by him in *Memories and Reflections*,[1] says that he saw certain Unionist Ministers who put before him what they considered to be the true meaning of their resolution. They said "the demand for his resignation in no way indicated a wish that he should retire. On the contrary, they did not believe that anybody else could form a Government—certainly not Mr. Lloyd George; so that the result would be the return of the Prime Minister with an enhanced position." The three Ministers mentioned by Lord Crewe in this connection are Lord Curzon, Lord Robert Cecil, and Sir Austen Chamberlain, but the recollection of the two latter is that they did not see Asquith until the Tuesday, when they made a very different communication. Of Lord Curzon we only know that he wrote the letter to Asquith already printed some time on the Monday, but this letter, as already pointed out, reveals the fact that Lord Lansdowne had made a reassuring explanation to Asquith, before it was written. There were no doubt, other comings and goings between Liberal and Unionist Ministers on this critical Monday; but if Asquith received a reassuring explanation from Lord Lansdowne, and it was followed by the reassuring letter from Lord Curzon,[2] it is not difficult to account for the belief which he undoubtedly held that he could rely on Unionist support, when he proceeded with his plan for reconstruction on the afternoon of Monday. It need scarcely be added that whatever explanation Lord Lansdowne gave, Lord Lansdowne honestly believed it to be true.

VII

The following day (Tuesday, 5th December) a meeting of Liberal Ministers was held at 10 Downing Street, at one o'clock, and after the correspondence had been read to them, they decided unanimously that Mr. Lloyd George's proposals could not be accepted.

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[1] II, p. 133.

[2] Lord Beaverbrook states (*Politicians and the War*, II, p. 256), that Lord Curzon (apparently on this Monday) gave Asquith "an absolute pledge" that "in no circumstances whatever would he, Curzon, or those acting with him take office under Lloyd George or Bonar Law." The reader must judge in the light of the correspondence whether Lord Beaverbrook can have been rightly informed.

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There was no dissentient, except possibly Mr. Montagu, on this point; and there is no foundation for the idea that Asquith was persuaded by his colleagues to go back on his negotiations with Mr. Lloyd George. He had taken action on his own account immediately after reading *The Times*' article, and his colleagues were of the opinion that he had acted rightly.

The climax came early in the afternoon of that Tuesday when Lord Curzon, Lord Robert Cecil, and Mr. Austen Chamberlain came to Downing Street and informed Asquith, to his great surprise, that they considered the position to have been completely changed by what had been described to them as his surrender to Mr. Lloyd George, and by the course of events since their party meeting on the Sunday. Asquith now put to them the plain question, would they be prepared to go on with him, if Mr. Lloyd George and Mr. Bonar Law refused? They replied definitely that they would not. They had discovered since Sunday that Mr. Bonar Law and Sir Edward Carson were solid with Mr. Lloyd George, and they saw no prospect of holding their party if this formidable trio went into Opposition, and were backed, as they would be, by the chief part of the Conservative press. They had also been informed that Mr. Lloyd George had secured the support of Labour and of a considerable number, if not a majority, of Liberals. In these circumstances they deemed it to be a necessity to reconsider their attitude to Mr. Lloyd George, and they now advised Asquith to co-operate with them, one of their number suggesting that he should serve under him.

Men of the same party could scarcely have acted thus to a man whom they had acknowledged as their Chief, but not for the first time (or the last) it was discovered on this occasion, that the Head of a Coalition Government leans on a broken reed if he relies on members of another party to stand by him in the stress of a personal emergency. From first to last Asquith had behind him all his Liberal colleagues in the Cabinet, but during the critical days his Unionist colleagues had remained in their separate compartment and held themselves free to transfer their allegiance from one Liberal leader to another, according to their judgment of the situation at the moment. They had apparently not realised that no decision was possible to Asquith without a clear knowledge of their intentions, and that their detachment from him to Mr. Lloyd George, now successfully accomplished, had throughout been the principal strategic aim of Asquith's opponents.

It would be idle to pretend that the decision which they announced at this final interview—coming as it did from men who had so recently expressed their distrust of Mr. Lloyd George—was not a shock and surprise to Asquith. But he accepted it at once as final and decisive and received with composure the letter which Mr. Bonar Law wrote after the Unionist meeting later in the afternoon :

Mr. Bonar Law to Asquith.

Dec. 5, 1916.

My dear Prime Minister,

Lord Curzon, Lord Robert Cecil, and Mr. Austen Chamberlain have reported to a meeting of all the Unionist members of the Cabinet, except Mr. Balfour, who was unable to be present, the substance of their conversation with you. After full consideration we are of opinion that the course which we urged on you on Sunday is a necessity, and that it is imperative that this course should be taken to-day. We hope that you have arrived at the same conclusion, but if this is not so, we feel that we have no choice but to ask you to act upon our resignations.

Yours sincerely,
A. Bonar Law.

The situation was now quite plain. The Liberal members of the Cabinet were unanimous that Mr. Lloyd George's terms could not be accepted ; the Unionist Ministers were no longer willing to back Asquith in resisting them. Labour had been benevolent and sympathetic but it too claimed its freedom to act according to the interests of its party, and by this time Asquith had come to attach little importance to the assurances of individuals that they would never serve with Mr. Lloyd George. That remained to be seen, but for the moment it was plainly impossible for him either to carry on or to form a new Government in face of the secession not only of Mr. Bonar Law and Mr. Lloyd George, but of all the Unionist members of the Government. He, therefore, late in the afternoon of 5th December, sent in his resignation to the King, and wound up his correspondence with Mr. Lloyd George with the following letter :

Asquith to Mr. Lloyd George.

10 Downing Street,
Dec. 5, 1916.

My dear Lloyd George,

It may make a difference to you (in reply to your last letter) if I tell you at once that I have tendered my resignation to the King.

In any case I should deprecate in the public interest the publication in its present form at this moment of your letters to me of this morning.

Of course I have neither the power nor the wish to prevent your stating in some other form the causes which have led you to take the step which you have taken.

Yours very sincerely,
H. H. Asquith.

CHAPTER LI

THE FALL OF THE GOVERNMENT

The alleged bluffing—Asquith and the political strategists—Conference at Buckingham Palace—Liberal ex-Ministers in conference—Reasons for standing out of the new Government—Its formation—Asquith's defence of Mr. Balfour. J.A.S.

1916 Age 64 THERE were, no doubt, at various stages of this affair some sanguine adherents who said or thought that Asquith had only to stand aside for it to be proved impossible for anyone else to form a Government, and upon certain random expressions of this kind the theory has been built up that he was " bluffing " when he handed in his resignation, and that he went out in serene confidence that he would be recalled. In view of the foregoing narrative it is scarcely necessary to discuss this seriously.

Asquith, on the evening of 5th December, was left without any sure support except from his Liberal colleagues. He had been warned that the Unionist Ministers upon whom he must have relied in any attempt to form a Government without Mr. Bonar Law and Mr. Lloyd George held themselves free to serve in a Lloyd George administration. They had objected to his efforts at accommodation with Mr. Lloyd George, but were prepared to make an accommodation of their own. It was an extraordinary and ironical situation, if the point of departure on the previous Sunday is borne in mind, but it is altogether incredible that Asquith could have had any illusions about the support he might expect from Unionist Ministers when he had ceased to be Prime Minister. In fact he had none.

The suggestions which Lord Beaverbrook throws out that Asquith was playing with his opponents—that he had various proposals in his mind to entrap them, that one moment he threatened a dissolution *with* Mr. Bonar Law to destroy Sir Edward Carson and the Unionists,[1] and at another a dissolution following on Mr. Bonar Law's resignation to make himself dictator[2]—are so many fantasies.

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[1] *Politicians and the War*, II, p. 106.

[2] *Ibid.*, II, p. 124. It is possible that Asquith may have said during one or other of his conversations, " What if I were to dissolve ? " But that he definitely rejected this possibility whenever it was seriously proposed is the agreed opinion of those who saw him most intimately in those days.

He had neither the skill for tactical manœuvres of this kind, nor the slightest inclination to employ them. Least of all would he have entertained the idea of fighting his way back to power after a tactical resignation. He had never in the whole course of his career fought for any personal advantage, and to do so in the middle of the War with the scandal of public recrimination inevitable in such a struggle would have been specially repugnant to him. So far from playing any game himself, it may much more truly be said that Asquith was puzzled and confused by the games which were apparently being played around him. The reader who follows the story with the clues that have since been supplied to the motives and intentions of the principal actors may even be tempted, like the unsophisticated audience of a melodrama, to cry out in warning as the heedless victim walks into so many traps. Asquith, it must be admitted, had nothing like the skill and resourcefulness of his opponents on this occasion, and those who are experts in such matters may well conclude that in the preparation of the ground, the gradual marshalling of forces, the division and isolation of opponents, the swift changes of front, the handling of the Press, and all else that goes to the make-up of modern political strategy, the displacement of Asquith in December 1916 stands as the classic example of this kind of warfare.

Mr. Bonar Law told his friend Lord Beaverbrook, who repeats it in his book, that Asquith said to him, when he declined to serve in a Bonar Law Government: "I have no feeling of hostility. You have treated me with complete straightforwardness throughout." Whatever may have been said at that moment, it would be idle to pretend that this was Asquith's considered view of these transactions. He never concealed from his friends that he considered himself to have been seriously misled about material facts, or minced words in characterising the parts played by some of the performers on this scene.

II

The narrative must now be taken up from the evening of 5th December. The King, having received Asquith's resignation, sent for Mr. Bonar Law who, on leaving Buckingham Palace, came straight to Downing Street. Lord Crewe has described the occasion:

> "We were dining at 10 Downing Street, and our host was called away to see Mr. Bonar Law, who had come from the Palace in order to inquire whether he could look for Asquith's help as a colleague if he proceeded to form an Administration. The reply was altogether discouraging, if not definitely in the negative."

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The next morning (Wednesday, 6th December) the King sent for Mr. Lloyd George, who also appears to have explained that he could not expect the necessary support. The King then invited Asquith, Mr. Bonar Law, Mr. Lloyd George, Mr. Balfour, and Mr. Henderson to confer with him and each other at Buckingham Palace on the same afternoon. What followed can best be told in Lord Crewe's words :

> "The general course of the discussion there was described by Mr. Asquith to his late Liberal colleagues at 10 Downing Street immediately after the meeting. It appears that at the opening there was some expression of opinion by the two alternative Prime Ministers that Mr. Asquith should endeavour to continue, but both, when asked by him if he could claim their assistance in any capacity, declared that this was impossible. Mr. Lloyd George, however, urged Mr. Asquith to attempt to form a Government from among his own supporters. It was next discussed whether if Mr. Bonar Law or Mr. Lloyd George became Prime Minister Mr. Asquith would serve under either. Both Mr. Balfour and Mr. Henderson hoped that he would do so, and the King may also have favoured this course ; Mr. Asquith, however, neither declined nor accepted, but decided to consult his friends before replying.
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> Another meeting of Liberal ex-Ministers was therefore called at Downing Street that evening, Mr. Henderson also attending. In the first place it was unanimously agreed that it was not feasible to proceed with a Government including no Unionist representation and without Mr. Lloyd George, more especially if the latter carried out the intention frankly stated in his letter of resignation, of conducting a campaign throughout the country against the methods hitherto pursued in carrying on the war. The next subject of discussion, for which the meeting was indeed principally called, was the possibility of Asquith's joining an administration formed by Bonar Law or Mr. Lloyd George. No mention was made on this occasion of any other alternative premiership, so that the issue was in some degree simplified. Mr. Henderson began by strongly urging the adhesion of Mr. Asquith, in order that a truly national Government might be formed. The only other Minister sharing his opinion was Mr. Montagu, who held that the prestige of Mr. Asquith ought not to be lost to the country. All the rest took the view that the combination would be mistaken and futile, and it was strongly expressed by Mr. McKinnon Wood, Lord Buckmaster, Mr. McKenna, Mr. Runciman, Lord Grey and myself.
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> Mr. Asquith entirely concurred with our statements, which were to the effect that no sentiments of personal dignity or of *amour propre* ought to prevent him from accepting a lower position, but that two fatal objections barred the way. The first was that, given the personalities involved, the scheme would not in fact work. Mr. Asquith had declined to become a Merovingian ruler as Prime Minister, and as a subordinate member of the new Government he would not submit to the autocracy of the War Committee, of which there was no assurance that he would even be a member. A collision was therefore probable, perhaps before very long ;

and it was felt that while the present break-up might be a national misfortune, it would amount to a serious disaster if later on Mr. Asquith and those Liberals who might join with him felt compelled to bring about another crisis. Mr. Lloyd George would in all probability find no difficulty in getting the requisite support; and if a new system was to be tried it had best be entrusted to colleagues of the same school of thought as the new Prime Minister. 1916 Age 64

In the second place, it was felt that Mr. Asquith's influence, though now so powerful and pervading, would melt away if he were thus to accept office. There would be no little resentment among many of his supporters both in Parliament and in the country. This was all the more significant because the advent of a new administration under a headstrong Minister mistrusted by many might of itself quicken extreme and reckless opposition, and perhaps drive not a few recruits in the direction of peacemaking. The creation therefore of a sober and responsible Opposition (if that be the proper term) steadily supporting the Government in the conduct of the war, criticizing when necessary, and in the last resort offering an alternative administration, was the best outcome of the crisis in the national interest. Mr. Asquith therefore stood out, and the present Ministry was formed by Mr. Lloyd George.

It should be observed that concurrently with this gathering at Downing Street the Unionist members of the late Government were meeting in Mr. Bonar Law's room at the Colonial Office, whence Lord Curzon came over to 'Number Ten' to hear the result of our conference, and was told of Asquith's refusal."[1]

This record, made at the time by a participator in these events, is a sufficient answer to the suggestion that Asquith put pressure on his colleagues not to serve under Mr. Lloyd George, but his defence of his own action in declining that service may be set side by side with it. He said at the Liberal Party meeting at the Reform Club on 8th December:

"I have been asked, and it is a perfectly fair question for you to put to me, why I did not agree to act in a subordinate capacity. My own inclination was strongly against such a course, and again I consulted my friends and colleagues, and they were unanimous in advising me not to do so. I need not tell you that they did not put it on any ground of *amour propre* at all, or wounded pride, or anything of the sort. No such consideration operated or could operate. I thought myself, and they pointed out, and I am certain it is true, that if I were to come into the new Government (which I wish from the bottom of my heart, without any kind of affectation or reserve, the most complete success) in whatever capacity you like, but not as head of the Government, these attacks would continue. If anything went wrong it would be said, 'Oh, there is the old paralysing touch there. You have not made a clean job of the matter. Why do you not remove the taint and the cancer which has been so fatal to the effective prosecution of the war in the past?' And my unfortunate new colleagues would in a very short time have found

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[1] *Memories and Reflections*, II, 135–137.

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themselves confronted with the necessity either of getting rid of me altogether or being themselves tarred with the same terrible brush. I really do not think, and my colleagues did not think, that I could as effectively serve the new Government, and what is still more important, the real interests of the State, as a member of it, as I could outside, and outside I am remaining with the sole object—I do not know that I need assure you of this—of lending such help as I can with all my heart and with all such strength as remains to me in order to assist them in the great task which lies before us."

III

The steps by which the Unionist Ministers were led from their starting-point of "reconstruction" with Asquith as Prime Minister to the acceptance of a Lloyd George Ministry with Asquith and his Liberal colleagues excluded stand outside this biography. Presumably Mr. Bonar Law decided that he could not be an effective Prime Minister in a House of Commons with a Liberal and Labour majority, or hold his own in Cabinet against Mr. Lloyd George without Asquith's support. The ground being thus cleared, Mr. Lloyd George appears to have persuaded Mr. Balfour, who had been removed by illness from participation in the previous transactions, that it was his patriotic duty to come in, and his adhesion seems to have overcome the reluctance of other Unionists. Mr. Lloyd George at the same time made proposals and promises to the Labour leaders, which in the words of one of them, made it "simply impossible" for them to refuse. The strange thing, looking back on these transactions is again that none of the adherents of the new Government appear to have asked what questions of policy lay behind them or what Mr. Lloyd George meant when he so passionately demanded a change in the direction of the war. It was Mr. Lloyd George's justification that he believed the removal of obstruction to the plans which he had so ardently advocated to be an urgent national necessity requiring and even compelling the steps that he took to undermine Asquith's position. But no one else seems to have inquired what was in his mind, or to have asked any guarantees or assurances about the conduct of the war which had been the whole subject of the dispute.

To Asquith this question was vital. His objection to transferring the conduct of the war to Mr. Lloyd George was not merely to the personal submission required of him ; he altogether mistrusted the new direction of the war which from his experience in the previous two years he believed Mr. Lloyd George to be aiming at. *The Times* had said in its leading article on 2nd December, "whether the War Office endorses Mr. Lloyd George's action we neither know nor care"

—an obvious allusion to the differences, about which it was well informed, between Mr. Lloyd George and the Imperial General Staff. But Asquith both knew and cared very much, and he had no intention of placing himself in a position in which he would have to play the part of passive spectator, while soldiers whom he trusted were overruled by the Secretary for War. 1916 Age 64

From this point of view he regarded the question of personnel as essential. There was something to be said for disburdening the Prime Minister of the necessity of daily attendance at the War Council, provided the men composing it were men whose judgment he trusted and whom he knew to be in general agreement with himself. But when Mr. Lloyd George proposed to eliminate Mr. Balfour in favour of Sir Edward Carson, and to compose the new War Council of men who had never professed to specialise in military matters, he was convinced that not efficiency but a new military policy under Mr. Lloyd George's control was what was aimed at. And that he would never have consented to.

IV

Nothing stands out more in the records of these days than Asquith's stout defence of Mr. Balfour, when Mr. Lloyd George had for some time past desired to be removed from the Admiralty. Knowing Mr. Lloyd George's sentiments, and hearing of the projected War Council, Mr. Balfour wrote from his sick-bed on 5th December to send in his resignation. "I am quite clear," he said, "that the new system should have a trial under the most favourable circumstances; and the mere fact that the new Chairman of the War Council *did* prefer, and, so far as I know, *still* prefers, a different First Lord of the Admiralty is to my mind quite conclusive, and leaves me in no doubt as to the manner in which I can best assist the Government which I desire to support." Asquith had already told Mr. Lloyd George that he could not be a party to any suggestion that Mr. Balfour should be displaced: and he now wrote to Mr. Balfour begging him to withdraw his resignation. To this Mr. Balfour answered:

Mr. Balfour to Asquith.

4 Carlton Gardens,
Pall Mall, S.W.,
Dec. 5, 1916.

My dear Asquith,

I am very grateful for your note and its enclosure. I very highly value your appreciation.

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I do not, however, feel much inclined to change my views. I still think (*a*) that the break-up of the Government by the retirement of Lloyd George would be a misfortune, (*b*) that the experiment of giving him a free hand with the day-to-day work of the Committee is still worth trying and (*c*) that there is no use trying it except on terms which enable him to work under the conditions which, in his own opinion, promise the best possible results. An open breach with Lloyd George will not improve matters, and attempts to compel co-operation between him and fellow-workers with whom he is in but imperfect sympathy will only produce fresh trouble.

I am therefore still of opinion that my resignation should be accepted, and that a fair trial should be given to the new War Council à la George.

Yours very sincerely,
Arthur James Balfour.

When Mr. Lloyd George offered Mr. Balfour the Foreign Secretaryship in his Government, he is said to have replied : "You put a pistol at my head." The number of those who desired the same coercion to be applied to them proved embarrassingly large. As Lord Beaverbrook's narrative shows, there were not enough pistols to go round.

CHAPTER LII

THE PENALTY OF THE PRIME MINISTER

The burdens of nine years—Asquith's qualities in war—Some defects—Contemporary evidence—The War position in December 1916—German evidence—The judgment of the whole War—The climax of long controversy—Expressions of sympathy with Asquith—His attitude to the Second Coalition and those who joined it. J. A. S.

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WAR, like Revolution, devours its children, and it is perhaps less surprising that Asquith fell in December 1916 than that he survived for so long. If Abraham Lincoln, instead of being entrenched for his term of office as President of the United States, had been a Prime Minister subject to the conditions of the British Cabinet system, he would almost certainly not have survived the long series of reverses which befell the North in the first years of the Civil War, or been able to stand up against the attacks of Horace Greely and others, who anticipated the part played by Lord Northcliffe in the Great War. In the Parliamentary countries of Europe all Prime Ministers were predestined victims of the failure to achieve victory within the expected time, and Asquith's character and methods made him an easy victim when the moment to strike came. In December 1916 a man who thought controversy in war-time odious and who was willing to depart peacefully at the first hint that he had outstayed his welcome could be no match for opponents and rivals who were prepared to make the country ring with their complaints, if they did not have their way.

It would have been miraculous if at the end he had not shown some signs of weariness. He had suffered shattering blows in the death of his eldest son to say nothing of his anxiety for others who were always in the danger zone. He had been Prime Minister for nearly nine years, a longer period continuously than any man had held that office since Lord Liverpool quitted the scene. None of his predecessors in the previous hundred years had borne anything like his load of responsibility or weathered so many and such violent storms as broke on his head simultaneously or in succession during the years in which he held the highest office. When he succeeded

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Campbell-Bannerman in 1908, the lists were already set for the struggles between traditional conservatism and modern progressive forces, which was to shake the Parliamentary edifice to its foundations between 1909 and 1914, and there was no moment of relief from it during the next five years. During the same years and in the height of the domestic tumult, his Government had at least twice to face the possibility of foreign war on the largest scale, and all through them he was engaged in unceasing efforts to stem or circumvent the forces which were driving the nations to the Great War. It fell to Asquith to play the part of a party leader in the most strenuous and embittered of all domestic struggles in modern times, but he nevertheless so played it that at the supreme moment of national danger he was acknowledged by all to be the man most capable of preserving national unity and convincing his fellow-countrymen that he was appealing to them in a just cause.

The War was for this country as for all others engaged in it, a plunge into the unknown, and heavy reverses, fearful casualties, vast and seemingly fruitless operations were the portion of all before the decision was reached. What one statesman in one country could do to control the stupendous course of events over the whole field was at any given moment extremely limited, but upon each in his own country was laid the task of maintaining national unity, preparing and supplying great armies, protecting the soldiers in the field from harsh and impatient criticism, steadying the public mind, avoiding errors in the choice of objectives which might make victory impossible, or mistakes in policy and diplomacy which might alienate friends or turn a neutral into an enemy. If no statesman in the Great War was equal to all these tests, very few, if any, proved equal to so many of them as Asquith. Soldier after soldier has borne witness to his generosity and fairness in dealing with commanders in the field, his steady refusal to shield himself at their expense or to cross the line which divided his functions from theirs.[1] It was his support which enabled Kitchener to make the best use for the nation of his great gifts and personal prestige, his again which enabled Sir Edward Grey to stand firm against hasty expedients which might have alienated the United States or made its entry into the war impossible. It was he who effected the transition from voluntary to compulsory service and so timed it as to win general consent for what in clumsier or less-trusted hands might have been a dangerous cause of schism. Asquith's personal interventions were as a rule so carefully disguised and his habit of claiming nothing for himself was so ingrained that it is often difficult to trace his hand in events in which he was known to be actively at work, but when the curtain is raised, it is nearly always to his advantage. His short periods at the Foreign Office and the War Office were fruitful in results. In the one case, he brought the negotiations with Italy to a successful conclusion; in the other, he made the two appointments which most influenced the course of events till the end of the war, that of Sir Douglas Haig to be Commander-in-Chief, and that of Sir William Robertson to be Chief of the Imperial General Staff.

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[1] General Sir Hubert Gough has quoted Lord Haig as having said that "Asquith had been most unjustly and unfairly blamed for the conduct of the war." "I can tell you, my dear Hubert, that as Commander-in-Chief, there is no question as to which was the better Prime Minister to serve under. . . . In Asquith I always had a loyal supporter, and there was no suggestion which I made for the benefit of the Army or for the more efficient conduct of the war operations that he did not do his best to carry out. . . . The efforts of Asquith were always directed to the support of Britain and the British Army. He was proud of the Empire and he trusted Britain and British soldiers." (*The Fifth Army*, by General Sir Hubert Gough, p. 52.)

In his appeals to the public he was the acknowledged master. He seemed to know by instinct how to strike the right mean between pessimism and optimism, how to prevent panic without exciting false hopes, how to steel the public mind when false hopes were shattered by unexpected reverses, how to maintain the cause without descending to abuse of the enemy. Asquith did not mince his words in dealing with "German militarism," but he never forgot the classical injunction to treat an enemy as though he may one day become a friend, and his war speeches are in consequence among the few that can be read in time of peace without repugnance.

On the other side some of his qualities undoubtedly became defects in war. His dislike of self-advertisement prevented him from appealing to the public in the dramatic way that the atmosphere of war demands. His extreme desire for Cabinet and National unity and his sense of the scandal of recriminations during the national peril led him to postpone or evade some conflicts of wills and personalities which had better have been faced quickly. His dislike of driving his colleagues, and the judicial habit of mind which had served him so well as a leader in peace inclined him to be umpire rather than dictator, and to let talk run on when it had better have been checked. Cabinets and War Councils complained that he was too indulgent to inferior minds, too anxious to let all opinions be heard before decisions were reached. If the truth be told, these habits concealed a certain arrogance which, though under control, was deep in his character. He believed a large number of the questions which agitated the public and loomed large in the minds of some of his colleagues to be of little or no importance, and he saw no

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harm in letting talk run on about them. Such as they were, he was willing to leave them to others, while he reserved his own time and thought for the things he thought vital. His colleagues were often unaware of the decisions which he took on his own initiative, or of the time and thought that he gave to the main strategical problems. When he left office in December 1916 every step had been laid down for the campaign in the following spring, and he had not waited for his colleagues to give his assent to all that the soldiers thought necessary to carry it out.

If at the end of November 1916 a free vote of his colleague could have decided the matter, there is little doubt that Asquith would have remained Prime Minister. The queer turns of the wheel which brought the minority to the top have obscured the facts, and his reputation suffered not a little at the time and later from the necessity felt by those who parted from him of justifying themselves by exaggerating his defects and ignoring his great qualities. The contemporary evidence, nevertheless, shows that up to the beginning of December 1916 he was still considered by the great majority of his colleagues to be the man most fitted to lead them, and to command public confidence ; and if in the end the minority prevailed, it was for reasons which had little to do with his merits or defects. What finally clinched the matter was his own judgment that the national cause would have been equally damaged by the friction which would have continued if he had patched up a truce with Mr. Lloyd George, and by the recrimination which would have followed, if he had entered into open conflict with him. To efface themselves seemed to Asquith and his colleagues the way of duty at that moment.

II

Controversy about the parts played by statesmen in the Great War will no doubt go on so long as history continues to be written, but the popular myth that Asquith delayed victory is unlikely to stand the test of facts. The testimony of German commanding officers that the military power of Germany was nearing exhaustion at the end of 1916 has already been quoted, but even more important evidence is to be found in the Reports of the Committee appointed by the German National Constituent Assembly to inquire into the War, and especially in that of the Sub-Committee which dealt with the events of 1916–1917. It is there declared to have been the unanimous opinion of the military experts that by the end of 1916 the unlimited Submarine War " constituted the only instrumentality

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whereby the War might be brought to a successful issue by military means."[1] In his evidence before this Committee Herr von Bethmann Hollweg describes himself as having been placed in the cruel dilemma of having to choose between the emphatic opinion of the military authorities that the War could not be won on land, and his own conviction that the unlimited submarine would bring disaster. It was true that the victory over Rumania was, according to the testimony of other witnesses, seized upon by the German Government as a relatively favourable moment for enlisting President Wilson's aid in an endeavour to make peace, but that success was rightly estimated as temporary, and the witnesses[2] are unanimous that by the autumn of 1916 "the conviction had been reached that the war could not be won on land by military means." The hopelsss military position was, in fact, made the pretext for the desperate remedy of the unlimited submarine. The collapse of Russia gave Germany a new and unforeseen opportunity in the following year, but the fact that she was unable to use it may fairly be attributed to her exhaustion in the previous years.

III

No judgment is possible except on the whole course of the War. Seen in retrospect the downfall of Asquith in December 1916 appears as the climax to the contention between Mr. Lloyd George and the majority of both the Liberal and the first Coalition Cabinet which had been going on from the end of 1914 till that moment. Was there a short cut to victory which an "imaginative" strategy would discover, or was the wearing down of the enemy's strength and resources an essential preliminary to the breaking of his will? Summarily Mr. Lloyd George believed in the imaginative strategy and the short cut, and Asquith did not. The believer in the short cut was almost from the beginning in despair at the ineptitude and lack of resourcefulness in the military mind which saw nothing else to do but hammer at the impenetrable barrier of the Western front. Submitting to it, acquiescing in it—acquiescing in the sacrifice of the little nationalities, Serbia and Rumania—mumbling the old shibboleths about interior and exterior lines, "waiting and seeing" while the war and the slaughter dragged interminably on, was, he kept declaring, lethargy and stupidity which were downright

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[1] See "Opinion of Prof. Dr. Dietrich Schaefer," Official German Documents, relating to the World Carnegie Endowment. Translation Vol. I, p. 171.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 187. Opinion of Dr. M. J. Bonn.

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criminal. The lost opportunities,[1] the disappointed hopes, the neglected warnings piled up in his mind to an unanswerable case which had only to be stated to destroy both the statesmen and the soldiers who had blocked the road to victory. Who, if the truth were told, would listen to their mere assertion that there was no alternative to the plainly disastrous course they were following? Who would not be convinced that a complete change in the direction of the war was necessary, if victory was to be won?

It cannot be said that any of the belligerents adhered with absolute consistency to the doctrine of the main theatre. All at one time or another scattered their forces in efforts which were of doubtful value in the final account. Asquith himself made an exception for the Dardanelles Expedition to the opinion that he otherwise stubbornly maintained that the War would be lost or won on the Western front. But it was not Asquith's opposition alone which caused the rejection of Mr. Lloyd George's schemes. These encountered the almost unanimous opposition of French as well as British soldiers, of French as well as British Ministers, and in the final stages were vetoed by imperative facts which after a dangerous period of wavering and indecision made concentration on the Western front a life and death necessity for both the British and the French people.

It is always impossible to prove that a rejected alternative would not have succeeded, but if the appeal is to military opinion, it may be said with much confidence that the theory of the war expounded in a classical passage of Sir Douglas Haig's final despatch[2] now commands general assent. In that the picture is presented of the War as a "single great battle" developing in the four years all the phases which in previous great battles had often been compressed into a few days or hours—the manœuvring for position, the clench, the climax, in which a weakening enemy makes his final effort.

> "The launching and destruction of Napoleon's last reserves at Waterloo was a matter of minutes. In the World War, the great sortie of the beleaguered German Armies, commenced on March 21, 1918, lasted for four months, yet it represents a corresponding stage in a single colossal battle."

The period of the clench, prolonged for years, put an almost intolerable strain upon soldiers, statesmen, and the public which

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[1] It is interesting to observe that the second volume of the War Diaries of Major General Max Hoffmann, Chief of the General Staff of the German Army of the East, is entitled, *The War of Lost Opportunities.*

[2] *London Gazette,* 8th and 10th April, 1919.

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looked on. The end was uncertain, the losses, the mistakes, the reverses, as the battle swayed this way and that, were appalling and immediate. Small wonder if Cabinets fell, Generals were superseded, and the public looked hopefully to anyone offering alternatives to the incessant "hammering at the impenetrable barriers," to Tirpitz proposing the unlimited submarine, to Mr. Lloyd George calling for expeditions in the Balkans or marches through the Julian Alps.

But if Lord Haig's theory of the war is right, Asquith's contribution to the final victory, both negative and positive, was second to none, and in no respect was he better justified by events than in his opposition to changes in the direction of the war desired by the advocates of an "imaginative strategy," in December 1916.

IV

If Asquith needed consolation in December 1916, he had it abundantly in the expressions of sympathy and loyalty which poured in upon him from old friends and colleagues, from Liberal Associations in the country, and from a multitude of humble and obscure people who wrote to assure him of their admiration and gratitude. The King offered him the Garter, which he was to accept at a later date, after he had become Earl of Oxford, but for the time being he declined it:

10 DOWNING STREET, S.W.,
Dec. 7, 1906.

SIR,

I am deeply touched by Your Majesty's most gracious letter with its kind and flattering offer of the Garter.

I trust that Your Majesty will permit me in all gratitude and humility to decline.

I have had the honour of serving Your Majesty as Prime Minister continuously from the first day of your reign. Through times of much difficulty and peril Your Majesty had honoured me with unstinted confidence and unwavering support. I desire no higher distinction.

With renewed gratitude for the past, believe me to be, Sir, now and always,

Your Majesty's devoted servant,
H. H. ASQUITH.

Queen Alexandra wrote:

Queen Alexandria to Asquith.

MARLBORO' HOUSE,
December 23rd, 1916.

MY DEAR MR. ASQUITH,

I cannot refrain from writing to tell you how much I have thought of you and all you must have been going through lately—and I know

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Let me wish you and yours a blessed Xmas, although I fear it can but be a sad one.

Yours very sincerely,
ALEXANDRA.

Lord Robert Cecil expressed the views of not a few of the Unionists who had joined the new Government:

Lord Robert Cecil to Asquith.

FOREIGN OFFICE,
Dec. 8th, 1916.

MY DEAR ASQUITH,

I hope you will forgive me for writing you a line of sincerest thanks for all your kindness to me while I have been your colleague. If I had been your life-long follower I could not have been treated with more complete confidence. I shall never forget it.

The last few days have been very painful. I hoped that I should not have been asked to serve. But as it was, I felt in a time like this bound to accept. You would I am sure have advised me to do so as Grey did. I can only hope the new Ministry will be a success. Lloyd George has many qualities, but he will never equal his predecessor in patience, in courtesy, or in that largeness of mind which despises the baser arts by which political success is attained. It has been a great lesson in personal loyalty to serve under you and I hope I shall profit by it. Forgive me having said so much, and believe me,

Your very sincere friend,
ROBERT CECIL.

Few tributes gave him more pleasure than one which came from an official who had had special opportunities of seeing him at work day by day in the War:

"The fact that you have given me so generously your friendship and confidence has been a continual source of pride and happiness to me, and I can say from the bottom of my heart, has made the heaviest tasks light.

What I most esteem is the privilege of having witnessed, and indeed of having shared in a humble capacity, in your masterly and courageous handling of one desperately difficult situation after another from the moment when war became imminent until to-day. I confess I have often wondered how you could find it physically possible to carry simultaneously so many heavy burdens. The country at present has only a slight conception of what it owes to your courage, nerve, tact, unswerving straightness, incredible patience and indomitable perseverance. History however will record it, and when the appropriate time comes, I shall not fail to give my testimony." 1916 Age 64

V

Mortifying as in outward appearances the events of December 1916 undoubtedly were, Asquith accepted them with his usual dignity and composure. He added nothing to the explanations given at the party meeting, and when he addressed his constituents at the beginning of February,[1] his main theme was the necessity of "wise and united concentration of all resources on the war." He had no personal rancour, and, as his successors knew, his advice and counsel were always available to them, if they chose to ask for it, and when in 1918 the new Prime Minister proposed to consult him about a statement he intended to make about the Peace terms of the Allies, he at once agreed, and the consultation took place at his house in Cavendish Square, Sir Edward Grey also being present.

During the next few months, there were many rumours of overtures being made to him to join the Coalition, and that indefatigable bridge-builder, Lord Elibank, seems to have been constantly at work between Downing Street and Cavendish Square. "The most formidable combination the country has ever seen," he wrote in May, "has been yours using Ll. G.'s powers (that represent the new forces that are arising, if not yet arisen) to the utmost. . . . We are nearing very dangerous days. You alone can stem the trouble; and by again using that which you alone can influence. Ll. G. left to himself will act wildly and we shall be in inextricable confusion. However much your feelings have been outraged, it will be necessary for you to pull things straight in the long run."

Asquith did not encourage these overtures, if overtures they are rightly called. He was no more willing in May than in December to be an ornamental member of any Cabinet, and his distrust of Mr. Lloyd George's methods had certainly not diminished in the interval. To accept responsibility without power, or in the alternative to renew the internal friction, were equally distasteful to him, and since Mr. Lloyd George had obtained the control he thought the public interest best served by leaving him to work in his own way. But apart from all else one consideration weighed heavily with him whenever these suggestions were made, namely that for him alone to make his peace with the new combination while friends and

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[1] Ladybank, 1st February.

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colleagues who had loyally supported him were left in the cold would have been deflection from the standard of loyalty and comradeship which he had always set for himself. It was often hinted in these days that he might have had the Lord Chancellorship for the asking; and other things being equal, he certainly would not have been deterred by any false pride from accepting it. He held the office in the highest respect, and could scarcely have been indifferent to its handsome emoluments and assured pension. But other things were not equal, and to preserve his own independence he considered a duty which he owed to himself and his party, looking to the future. He did not foresee—no one in those days could have foreseen—the audacious stroke by which the Coalition was to extinguish the Liberal Party when the War ended.

With all his seeming magnanimity he had an inward contempt which sometimes broke out into formidable epithets, for time-servers and climbers who had rushed to make their peace with the new regime. The scramble for places and honours and the inordinate multiplication of both to meet the demand offended all his instincts, and he was outspoken and unsparing in his comments. Roughly he divided the Coalitionist Liberals into two groups, those who pretended, and those who did not, and he had numerous letters from both. Those who wrote frankly after expressing polite regrets that they proposed to join the new Government and saw no reason why they should not, almost invariably drew a friendly answer: "You are quite right, I see no reason why you should not." But when a former junior colleague with whom he had been on especially intimate terms wrote several pages protesting the "anguish which separation caused" him, the terrible sense of duty which had compelled him to come to the rescue of a weak Government by accepting a not very important office, and the "sorrow" with which he had been "forced to fight the temptation to talk it over with you," it was too much. "In view of our past relations," he replied shortly, "it is perhaps not unnatural that I should find it difficult to understand and still more difficult to appreciate your reasons for the course which you tell me you propose to take."

CHAPTER LIII

THE CHANGED CONDUCT OF THE WAR

The War in 1917—The effort to change the direction—The Nivelle Scheme and the British Army—Failure of the scheme—Mr. Lloyd George's Paris speech—Asquith's reply—East and West again—The Mesopotamian Report—Renewed attacks on Asquith—His retort—Visit to the Front—Asquith and Lord Lansdowne—Electoral reform—The Irish Convention. J. A. S.

THE accession of the new Government was followed by all the outward manifestations which had been found wanting in Asquith's Administration, the grand high pressure of bustle and excitement, the wide advertisement of the activities of Ministers, the substitution of eulogy for criticism in the newspapers. It may well be said hereafter that the chief achievement of the Government in the year 1917 was the defeat of the German submarine, which became a new and deadly menace; but, so far as land warfare was concerned, the next months were to illustrate the difficulties, dangers and final impossibility of the "change in the direction of the war" which Mr. Lloyd George had so passionately demanded. Though the military history of these months stands outside this biography, certain aspects of it need to be considered, in so far as they provide a measure of the criticism passed upon Asquith and his Administration. 1917 Age 64–5

No more was heard about the impossibility of the Prime Minister presiding over the War Council or about man-power or various other questions which had been used against Asquith in the days of December. The new Prime Minister not only constituted himself Chief of the War Council but set himself at once to bring about "the change in the direction of the war" which he had demanded at the beginning of December 1916. At a Conference held in Rome at the beginning of January he produced and strongly recommended to the Allies a plan for a combined British-French offensive through the Julian Alps via Laibach to Vienna. It took all the staffs by surprise, and most of all the British General Staff who heard of it for the first time on this occasion; and the Ministers present could do no more than refer it to their military advisers.[1]

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[1] Sir William Robertson's *Soldiers and Statesmen*, II, p. 195.

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The French, it was soon evident, had no intention of embarking upon this or any other plan which would have removed a large part of the Allied forces to a new battle-ground while their own country was in occupation of the enemy, and still, in their opinion, the main theatre. Instead of discussing the Laibach-Vienna scheme, they countered it at once with another which prevented its discussion. On his way back to London from Rome Mr. Lloyd George was met at a station near Paris by General Nivelle, the new Commander-in-Chief of the French Army, who broached a plan for a joint British and French offensive on the West front, to be conducted on entirely new principles, which, according to its author, promised speedy and decisive results.

The British Commander-in-Chief and the Imperial General Staff were sceptical and preferred the plan concerted with General Joffre at a Conference at Chantilly in the previous November for pressing the Germans during the winter and renewing the offensive on the Western front at the earliest moment possible in the spring. But their doubts and hesitations seem only to have confirmed Mr. Lloyd George in his mistrust of British officers, and his belief that they were impervious to new and imaginative ideas. He now had the opportunity of clinching this adverse judgment in an executive act and he took it without flinching. At an Allied Conference held at Calais on 26th and 27th February he announced that the British War Cabinet not only accepted the Nivelle plan but had decided to give General Nivelle command of the whole of the operations connected with it—i.e. to make their own Commander-in-Chief subordinate to the French General and to place the British Army at the disposal of that General. Sir William Robertson, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, was not summoned to the meeting of the War Council at which this decision was taken, and both he and General Haig, the British Commander-in-Chief, heard of it for the first time at the Conference.[1]

If Mr. Lloyd George had in view an operation of this kind when he challenged the conduct of the war by the Asquith Cabinet, he was assuredly right in thinking that a change of Government would be necessary to give effect to it. It is safe to say that Asquith would not have consented to any of these proceedings. Not only did he hold a totally different opinion from Mr. Lloyd George about the competence of British Commanders, but he had always resolutely refused either to act behind their backs or to overrule them in their own sphere. Had the Nivelle plan been presented to him, he would undoubtedly have placed it at once before the Imperial General

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[1] Sir William Robertson's *Soldiers and Statesmen*, II, 205–207.

Staff, and only in the event of there being a consensus of expert opinion in its favour would he have consented to its being adopted.

In the event the British objections proved to be well-founded. The new plan required the old to be abandoned, and in the change from the one to the other the Germans retreated unmolested from the Somme about the time when the offensive arranged with General Joffre in the previous November would have begun. This changed one of the hypotheses on which the Nivelle plan was based, and there were other unfavourable factors before 9th April, when the projected joint attack took place. When the time came, the British Army loyally fulfilled the part assigned to it, and in the Battle of Arras made substantial advances and engaged a large German force which might otherwise have been available for use against the French. But the principal part of the plan, which consisted in a swift rupture of all enemy positions on the Aisne and its immediate exploitation by an advancing army, broke down before the Craonne ridge, which the French were unable to take. Nivelle, it now appeared, had no magic which enabled him to do what his predecessors had failed to do, and the losses under the new plan were even greater than under the old. But this time the reaction was far worse than before, since expectations had been raised so high ; and there were serious troubles in the French Army which prevented it from undertaking further active operations and threw on us the brunt of the fighting till near the end of the year.

II

So far the changed direction of the War had resulted only in what military opinion has since recognised as one of the greatest disasters suffered by the Allies during the War. But this experience seems only to have confirmed Mr. Lloyd George in his belief that victory was beyond reach on the Western front. In a speech at Paris on 13th November, 1917, after the Caporetto disaster in Italy, he condemned the strategy of the Allies root and branch. The scene he saw before him was one of futile unintelligent bloodshed. For years we had been "hammering with all our might at the impenetrable barrier in the west." We had wasted our strength in the profitless battles of 1915, and in "the bloody assaults of the Somme," and thrown away the opportunities of saving Serbia and succouring Rumania. "We have won great victories," he declared, "but when I look at the appalling casualty lists I sometimes wish it had not been necessary to win so many. . . . When we advance a kilometre into

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the enemies' lines, snatch a small scattered village out of his cruel grasp, we shout with unfeigned joy." How different it might have been if the Allies had sent their forces when Italy was within forty miles of Laibach, and the road to Vienna could have been forced.

The Paris speech was an epitome of the many speeches which Mr. Lloyd George would no doubt have made if he had resigned and Asquith had remained head of the Government in December 1916. It was an indictment, as he acknowledged to the House of Commons, not only of British but of the entire Allied strategy. It presented the speaker as the one man who had consistently given sound advice and who had foreseen and predicted the catastrophes that would follow if it were rejected. It summarised all the arguments which he had addressed in vain to the military authorities and to his own colleagues from the beginning of 1915 onwards, and it wound up with the statement, all too familiar to his former colleagues, that he would not have remained responsible for the conduct of the war unless some change had been effected.

Up to that moment Asquith, though well informed as to the facts, had scrupulously refrained from all criticism of the military operations of that year. He knew too well the hazards of war, and had suffered too much from unmerited reproaches to wish to upbraid the Government because a plan which they had honestly adopted had disappointed expectations. But the Paris speech pained and shocked him both for the injustice which it seemed to do to British commanders and for the discouragement which it was likely to bring to the men who were fighting desperate battles in Flanders and France, and fighting them, as he knew, on the urgent representation of their Allies that it was imperative to keep the Germans engaged. The Government, as he viewed the matter, had the right to ignore these representations and to suspend the fighting in France, but it had no right to let it go on, and at the same time describe it publicly as a fruitless and costly hammering at an impenetrable barrier. This on any theory of ministerial responsibility was inexcusable.

Asquith expressed himself very strongly to this effect in private, but the times were critical and enough recrimination had followed behind the scenes to make it extremely undesirable to add to it in public. So he contented himself with a reasoned and studiously moderate remonstrance when the speech was debated in the House of Commons a few days later :

"It is new to me, it is a revelation to me that the value and importance of a battle or a campaign can be gauged by kilometric scale. What is

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> the implication of language like that? The suggestion surely is—and in that sense the language has been universally understood—the suggestion is that British blood and British bravery, and, when I say British I of course include our Oversea Dominions—has been relatively squandered on aims of minor moment—I shall be very glad to be corrected—when with better strategy, a larger vision, and more complete co-ordination, it might have been more profitably spent elsewhere. Now let me for a moment examine that hypothesis, and I will take for an illustration what my right hon. friend calls the bloody assaults on the Somme. Remember, this was a most critical moment of the war—the most critical moment certainly in the fortunes of the Western campaign. If Verdun had been permitted to fall the results were simply incalculable. Talk of co-ordination. I assert, and I assert with knowledge, there never was a set of operations more carefully concerted than Sir Douglas Haig's aggressive on the Somme and the later stages of the French defence of Verdun, and they succeeded in their purpose. I agree there is not very much to show for it in point of acreage, but if you look across, as you can now, the blasted woods and the cratered fields, dotted here and there with small graveyards of British soldiers, from Delville to Bethune—these are not matters of arithmetic and mensuration. It is not too much to say that these bloody assaults saved the whole situation, and did at least as much—and I am not sure I should not be right in saying they did more than anything in the whole of the war—to damage the prestige of the German command and the *moral* of the German army.[1]

If the speech was ineffective, as the Prime Minister's supporters said, it was deliberately so, for, as Asquith well knew, an "effective" speech at that moment might have been a grave disservice to the Allied cause.

The debate once more brought into high relief the old contention between East and West. After nearly twelve months as Prime Minister Mr. Lloyd George had found it impossible to effect the change in the direction of the war, which was his cardinal aim, as when he was a member of Asquith's Cabinet. The reasons which had weighed in the previous years were stronger than ever at the end of 1917. Mr. Lloyd George might believe that the situation would have been different or better if his advice had been taken, but with Russia out of the war, and Germany free to wheel large forces from east to west, French and British military opinion was unanimous that the risk could not be taken of uncovering the French capital and the Channel ports on the unlikely chance that some distant expedition might bring a decision. By this time it had become a serious question whether the Western front could be sufficiently reinforced to meet the great German offensives which were expected for the coming spring, and Mr. Lloyd George's

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[1] House of Commons, 19th November, 1917.

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persistence in his ideas was yet to have serious consequences, when that question was approached. But for the moment it was a relief to find that the change on which he insisted as the condition of his "continuing to be responsible" was no more than the establishment of a body called the "Supreme War Council," composed of Ministers but without executive power, which was to sit at Versailles to "ensure the concordance" of the military plans. Asquith was frankly sceptical about the usefulness of this body, but in the debate of 19th November he confined himself to a few moderate criticisms which fell far short of what was afterwards said about it by those who took part in its proceedings. At this stage both he and Mr. Lloyd George spoke strongly against "unity of command" in the sense of appointing a generalissimo over all the armies, and neither of them foresaw the unique emergency which was to make that step imperative in the following year.

III

The Dardanelles Report has already been dealt with, but a word must be added about the Mesopotamian Report which was debated in the House of Commons on 12th and 13th July of this year. The Report censured in various degrees the Government of India and its military officers for having failed to make adequate provision of transport and medical service for the advance on Bagdad, and in a minor degree the Home Government for having accepted misleading advice from their military experts who in their turn had accepted a misleading assurance from the General on the spot that he had a sufficient force for his purpose. On the day before the debate Mr. Bonar Law announced that the Government proposed to set up a court of inquiry to go further into the responsibility of individuals. This was to consist of three military officers and two judges or persons who had held high judicial office. When the debate opened Mr. Chamberlain, the Secretary of State for India, announced his resignation on the ground that, having been mentioned by name in the Report, and made liable to have his conduct called in question by a judicial tribunal at any moment, it was impossible for him to continue to administer his office.

Asquith, who had a very sincere regard for Mr. Chamberlain, expressed his profound regret at this announcement and said that in his opinion it was wholly uncalled for. He further took strong exception to the proposed Court of Inquiry and declared it to be "absurd to submit to two or three judges the question whether this or that statesman, soldier or sailor had formed or acted on a mistaken judgment of policy." He knew, he said, of "only one tribunal suited to try a question of that kind, and that was the House of Commons." This had been his view from the days of the Parnell Commission, and it was to find natural expression on the even more critical occasion of the debate on the Maurice letters in the following year. He abhorred the mixing of the judicial and the political function and thought it damaging to the Bench that it should be involved in controversies about policy and strategy. The House was so evidently of the same opinion that the Government abandoned the proposed further inquiry and left the public to form its own judgment on the questions of policy and the military and naval authorities to deal in their own way with the officers censured in the Report.

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The public were justly indignant at the story of the suffering inflicted on gallant men by the neglect or bungling of some of these officers and their superiors, and Asquith's assailants in the Press endeavoured, as usual, to turn the stream of wrath upon him. His name had not been mentioned in the Report, and it must have been evident to any fair-minded reader of it that except on the theory of collective responsibility, which applied equally to most members of the new Government as well as of the old, his part in it was extremely remote. For once he turned on his critics, and an attack in the *Morning Post*, which charged him with having forced the hands of the Secretary of State (Mr. Chamberlain) by "a manœuvre which the latter had apparently not the subtlety to detect or the strength to frustrate" gave him the opportunity of explaining that he happened to be away ill when the decision to advance on Bagdad was taken, though, as he generously added, he fully and whole-heartedly approved when he got back and learnt what had passed. His comment was brief and caustic:

> "I am so frequently cast for the part of leading villain by those who may be described as the playwrights of the gutter that it seems a pity, and I am very sorry for them, that I should have for once to be content with the relatively inconspicuous, though still highly criminal rôle of an accessory after the fact. . . .
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> I should not be doing justice to what I and many others in this country and also in the House feel if I did not add that the manner in which the Report has been travestied, perverted, and exploited is one of the most scandalous chapters in the history of the degradation of the Press."

A quotation from Burke wound up a highly effective speech:

> "It is not to be imagined how much of service is lost from spirits full of activity and full of energy who are pressing, who are rushing forward

with great and capital objects when you oblige them to be continually looking back. Whilst they are defending one service they defraud you of a hundred. Applaud us when we run, console us when we fall, cheer us when we recover, but let us pass on—for God's sake let us pass on."

On this occasion at all events Asquith's assailants had overshot the mark, and their attacks brought strong and weighty protests from Unionists and the more reputable section of the Unionist press. Lord Curzon said in the House of Lords that the demand for punishment had almost degenerated into the witch-hunting of barbaric times. The *Birmingham Post*, the *Yorkshire Post*, and the *Glasgow Record* spoke scathingly of the London newspapers which had "battened on the Report" and thrown fair play to the winds in their malicious and vindictive attacks on individuals who deserved well of the country.

IV

A few of Asquith's other activities during the year 1917 may be briefly noted here. On 18th April, in the absence of the Prime Minister (who happened to have gone abroad for a consultation with the Italian Prime Minister) he made one of the finest of the ceremonial speeches, in which he always excelled, in speaking to the House of Commons Resolution welcoming the entry of the United States into the War. In the second week of September he went to France, and stayed at Cassel with Sir Douglas Haig, who was then engaged upon the Paschendaele offensive. He also visited Delville Wood, where his son Raymond had been killed in the previous year. Wherever he went he received the warmest welcome from commanding officers and soldiers alike. He brought back much food for thought, but kept his own counsel about all military matters in his public speeches. To keep war aims moderately but clearly stated he considered in these times to be the best service he could render, and whether in Parliament or on platforms in the country he seldom missed an opportunity of stating them in his own way. He was early in the field—it may even be said earliest in the field—in advocating the method of dealing with international disputes which President Wilson crystallized in the phrase "League of Nations." He had said at Dublin in September 1914 that one of the chief aims of the Allies was "the substitution for force, for the clash of competing ambitions, for groupings and alliances, and a precarious equipoise, of a real European partnership, based on the recognition of equal rights, established and enforced by a common will." After quoting these words in a speech in the House of

Commons in December 1917,[1] "That," he said, "is the League of Nations—no belated afterthought of statesmen who thought it expedient to deceive the world and to varnish selfish and ambitious purposes with a veneer of idealism, but the avowed purpose from the very first so far as we here are concerned." Alluding in the same speech to Lord Lansdowne's recently published letter which was being hotly denounced as a council of surrender, he came to the rescue of an old friend and adroitly turned the letter to his own purpose :

> "If Lord Lansdowne had suggested that we should slacken our prosecution of the war, or abandon the cause of one or more of our Allies, or indicate to enemies, who have so far steadily refused to state or even to hint their terms, that we are ready to sue for peace—and I have seen all these interpretations put upon his letter either at home or in other countries—there are few among us who would not dissociate themselves from any such proposals. But I take the stress of his main argument—apart from subsidiary points—to be this ; that the Allies, while pursuing the war with vigour and purpose, should endeavour to make it increasingly clear to the peoples of the war, both belligerent and neutral, that the only aims for which we are fighting are rational and unselfish in themselves, and are those for which we entered the war ; and that by their attainment we are convinced that we may look for a durable peace, safeguarded by the conjoint authority of an International League. To use President Wilson's latest words, the aim is to bring into effective existence that 'partnership not merely of Governments but of peoples which must henceforth guarantee the world's peace.' Even now there is abundant evidence, not that the Governments but that the peoples of the enemy countries are kept artificially in the dark as to our real purposes, both for war and for peace, and I for one shall continue to do what I can to raise the veil, and to let in, if it may be, some rays of light." (Dec. 11, 1917.)

Apart from the War he was strong on the need of following up the report of the Speaker's Conference on electoral reform with immediate legislation. It would be "criminal folly," he told the House of Commons, "to throw away this unique opportunity." The debates on this subject gave him the opportunity of declaring his adhesion to Women Suffrage (8th March) and Proportional Representation (4th July). On the latter subject he said that he had been "increasingly impressed with the illogical application of the representative principle by the adoption of minority rule, and he held that with the addition of 8,000,000 new electors the tendency to the domination of majorities and suppression of minorities would increase." The application of Proportional Representation to a certain number of large constituencies, as proposed by the

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[1] House of Commons, 20th December, 1917.

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Speaker's Conference, he thought to be a judicious compromise, and it was a serious disappointment to him that the Government did not adopt it and get it through Parliament.

He was a warm supporter—even it may be said a prime instigator—of the Irish Convention which, under the chairmanship of Sir Horace Plunket, made a last and unavailing effort to settle the Irish question on the basis of the previous Home Rule Bills. Hopes ran high for a time, and in February the Convention propounded a scheme approved of by the majority of its members. But it had not overcome the opposition of Ulster, and, while it was debating, Irish Nationalists were day by day in greater numbers transferring their allegiance to Sinn Fein whose demands went far beyond the concession of Home Rule as hitherto defined. The "Agreed Settlement" which had been the dream of statesmen was farther off than ever when the War ended, and was very unlikely to be effected by a Government which was threatening a recalcitrant Ireland with conscription at the same time that it proffered its olive branch.

CHAPTER LIV

THE MAURICE DEBATE

The reinforcement of the Western Front—The Commander-in-Chief and the Government—The Versailles Council—Asquith's questions—The German attack of 21st March—General Maurice's letter—The Maurice debate—Asquith and the Two Judges proposal—The change of issue—Confusion in Parliament—Events at the Front. J. A. S.

1918
Age 66

By a singular development of events in Parliament, which will be recorded in its place, Asquith's fortunes and those of the Liberal Party became so involved in the military operations of the year 1918 that it is necessary to dwell on these in some detail.

It is now common knowledge—though it was known only to the few at the time—that the War Cabinet was in a state of acute conflict with the Commander-in-Chief and the Chief of the Imperial General Staff during the autumn and winter of 1917–1918. The story has been told with complete frankness by Mr. Winston Churchill,[1] by the authors of *Sir Douglas Haig's Command*, and by Sir William Robertson in his *Soldiers and Statesmen*, and their narratives are confirmed by Sir Henry Wilson's Diaries. The facts themselves do not seem to be in dispute; and they show soldiers and statesmen in the last phase of the struggle about the direction of the war, which had been going on continuously since the beginning of the year 1915, and which caused Asquith's downfall in December 1916. During the autumn of 1917 Sir Douglas Haig persisted in the Paschendaele offensive in spite of the muffled disapproval of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, deeming it imperative, apart from any objective which might be gained, to keep the largest number of Germans engaged in view of the situation in France and the German attack upon Italy.[2] The Prime Minister and his colleagues did not feel themselves strong enough to veto these operations with the probable consequence of having to face Sir Douglas Haig's resignation, but they were dismayed by the casualties and the failure to obtain the hoped-for objective, and sceptical about the necessity of keeping the Germans engaged. They therefore resolved, as soon as the Paschendaele operations ceased, that there should be no more offensives in France until the American army was ready to take the field, which meant in all probability no more during the year 1918 ; and since they mistrusted their own capacity to restrain the Commander-in-Chief, they further decided that he should be supplied with only such troops as would in their opinion be necessary for him to keep the defensive. Sir Douglas Haig sent urgent warnings that he expected to be attacked in great force by the enemy who, owing to the Russian collapse, was now free to concentrate on the Western front, but the Cabinet appears to have thought him unduly alarmist, and the Prime Minister, being still convinced that the road to victory would be found in the East, was anxious to keep as large a force as possible intact for eventual use in that region. Mr. Churchill, who was at the time Minister of Munitions, relates that he dissented from this conclusion and put in vehement official arguments against it and backed them by the strongest personal appeals :

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[1] *The World Crisis*, 1916–1918, Part II, p. 376 *et seq.*

[2] *Sir Douglas Haig's Command*, I, pp. 20–26 and Chap. XIV. See also *Field-Marshal Earl Haig*, by Brig.-Gen. John Charteris, p. 276:—

"Confidence of reaching the goal was not the determining consideration. It was not hope but necessity that decided. At this very moment Petain was appealing to the British to continue their attacks and to give the French time to reorganise after their defeat on the Aisne."

> Nothing, however, had the slightest effect. The Prime Minister and his colleagues in the War Cabinet were adamant. Their policy was not decided without full deliberation. They were definitely opposed to any renewal of the British offensive in France. They wished the British and French armies to observe during 1918 a holding and defensive attitude. They wished to keep a tight control over their remaining man-power until the arrival of the American millions offered the prospect of decisive success. In the meanwhile action in Palestine, with forces almost inappreciable in the scale of the Western Front, might drive Turkey out of the war, and cheer the public mind during a long and grievous vigil. They were fully informed of the growing German concentration against Haig, and repeatedly discussed it. But they believed that the Germans if they attacked would encounter the same difficulties as had so long baffled us, and that our armies were amply strong enough for defence. Haig was accordingly left to face the spring with an army whose 56 infantry divisions were reduced from a thirteen to a ten-battalion basis.[1] and with three instead of five cavalry divisions,[2] which in the absence of alternative methods were at least to render valuable service. (*World Crisis*, II, 384–5.)

This, as Mr. Churchill goes on to say, was not the end of Sir Douglas Haig's trials. With his reduced divisions he was asked to extend his front by fourteen miles, and only with great difficulty resisted the French demand that he should add another thirty. The Prime Minister's view was apparently that the Western front was "over-insured," and that any danger of a concentrated attack at one point would be sufficiently met by the plan proposed by the Supreme Council of constituting a general reserve. This reserve was to be in charge of a committee composed of representatives of four nations, and the British Commander-in-Chief was asked to contribute six or seven divisions to it. Haig distrusted committees, and replied that with his extended line his force was already dangerously depleted, and that to part with six divisions on the chance of being reinforced *after* a German attack was to incur a greater risk than he was justified in taking. By the beginning of March it was known that this scheme had fallen through, but no further steps were taken to supplement the British force. "Events," says Mr. Churchill, "moved forward without the British army receiving either the reinforcements for which Haig had pleaded or the reserves which Lloyd George had laboured to supply." Finally on 21st March this army was called upon to meet what the same authority describes as "a German onslaught far exceeding in power and fury anything that had yet been experienced." After this onslaught 170,000 men were rushed over to France, and in addition two complete divisions, twenty-four siege batteries, and five siege patrols were transferred to the Western front from Palestine, as well as a number of battalions from Salonica. All these transfers had been urged upon the Government in January but refused.

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[1] Or from twelve to nine, if the Pioneer Battalion is excluded.

[2] Two Indian Cavalry divisions were sent from France to Palestine.

II

The facts were known in military circles and there had been warnings in the Press. Colonel Repington, the military correspondent of the *Morning Post*, was prosecuted and silenced for his intimations in the month of February, and no one could question the military reasons which made it imperative at that time to forbid discussion about the strength of the army in France. Asquith, who was fully apprised of the facts, confined himself to putting two very cautious questions to the Prime Minister[1] on its becoming known that the functions of the Versailles Council had been enlarged to include executive action, and that Sir William Robertson had declined the post of British Military Adviser to that body, and had been removed from his position as Chief of the Imperial General

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[1] House of Commons, 12th February, 1917.

Staff. He asked merely the nature of the enlargement and whether any change had been made or was contemplated in the status and functions of the Commander-in-Chief or the Chief of the General Staff. The answer to both questions was evasive, but it contained a suggestion, which Asquith greatly resented, that he was asking for information which "any Intelligence Officer on the other side would gladly pay large sums of money to get." When he remonstrated, Mr. Lloyd George disclaimed any offensive intention, but his words served as a text for renewed attacks on Asquith by newspapers which had never disguised that intention.

The incident was unimportant in itself, but it was serious as a symptom. More and more the theory was being set up that it was unpatriotic even to question the Government, and the Prime Minister seemed to resent the slightest breath of criticism. After the German stroke on 21st March feeling was at a high pitch, and Ministers were no doubt aware that they were being sharply criticised in military circles for having failed to provide the reinforcements for which Sir Douglas had been calling, and which, if provided in time, might have prevented the disasters of that and the following days. Though he was kept well-informed by his many military friends Asquith said no word on military affairs during this critical time except to urge the necessity of "concentrated effort" on an "undivided front." But those who knew the facts were growing more and more restive at answers respecting the strength of the army in France given by Ministers at question time, and there were loud murmurs behind the scenes at the speech which the Prime Minister made in introducing a new Military Service Bill on 9th April. In that he gave the House to understand that if the army had suffered a reverse, it was not for lack of men, and used language about General Gough, the Commander of the Fifth Army, which was greatly resented by many of his brother-officers. The rumour was now current that the Government was contemplating the supersession of Sir Douglas Haig at the earliest convenient moment.[1]

In the debate on the Military Service Bill Asquith came warmly to the support of the Government except on the proposal to apply compulsory service to Ireland, which he thought impolitic and untimely, and more likely to create new embarrassments than to add to our military strength. So far he had said not a word in criticism of the conduct of the War, but on 7th May an event took place on which he felt bound in duty to intervene. 1918 Age 66

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[1] Not apparently without serious justification. See *Field-Marshal Sir Henry Wilson*, II, p. 99. "I could not get Milner and Lloyd George to make up their minds. On the whole I advised Haig being brought home. But Lloyd George and Milner would not decide." 11th May, 1918.

This was the publication in the Press of a letter from Major-General Maurice, recently Director of Military Operations, challenging statements made in Parliament by Mr. Bonar Law and the Prime Minister on the extension of the British front and the strength of the army in France at the time of the March offensive. Mr. Bonar Law had said that the question of the extension of the line was "not dealt with at all by the Versailles War Council," and General Maurice affirmed that he was at Versailles "when the question was decided by the Supreme War Council to whom it had been referred." The Prime Minister had said that "Notwithstanding the heavy casualties in 1917, the army in France was considerably stronger on 1st January, 1918, than on 1st January, 1917." "That statement," said General Maurice, "implies that Sir Douglas Haig's fighting strength on 1st January, 1918, on the eve of the great battle which began on 21st March, had not been diminished. That is not correct."

The suspicious and the malicious jumped to the conclusion that Asquith was privy to the publication of this letter. That was not so. The only communication he had from General Maurice reached him on the morning on which it appeared in the newspapers :

Major-General Maurice to Asquith.

6. 5, 1918.

DEAR MR. ASQUITH,

I have to-day sent to the press a letter which will, I hope, appear in to-morrow's papers. When I asked you to see me last Thursday, I had intended to consult you about this letter, but on second thoughts I came to the conclusion that, if I consulted you, it would be tantamount to asking you to take responsibility for the letter, and that I alone must take that responsibility. I ask you to believe that in writing the letter I have been guided solely by what I hold to be the public interest.

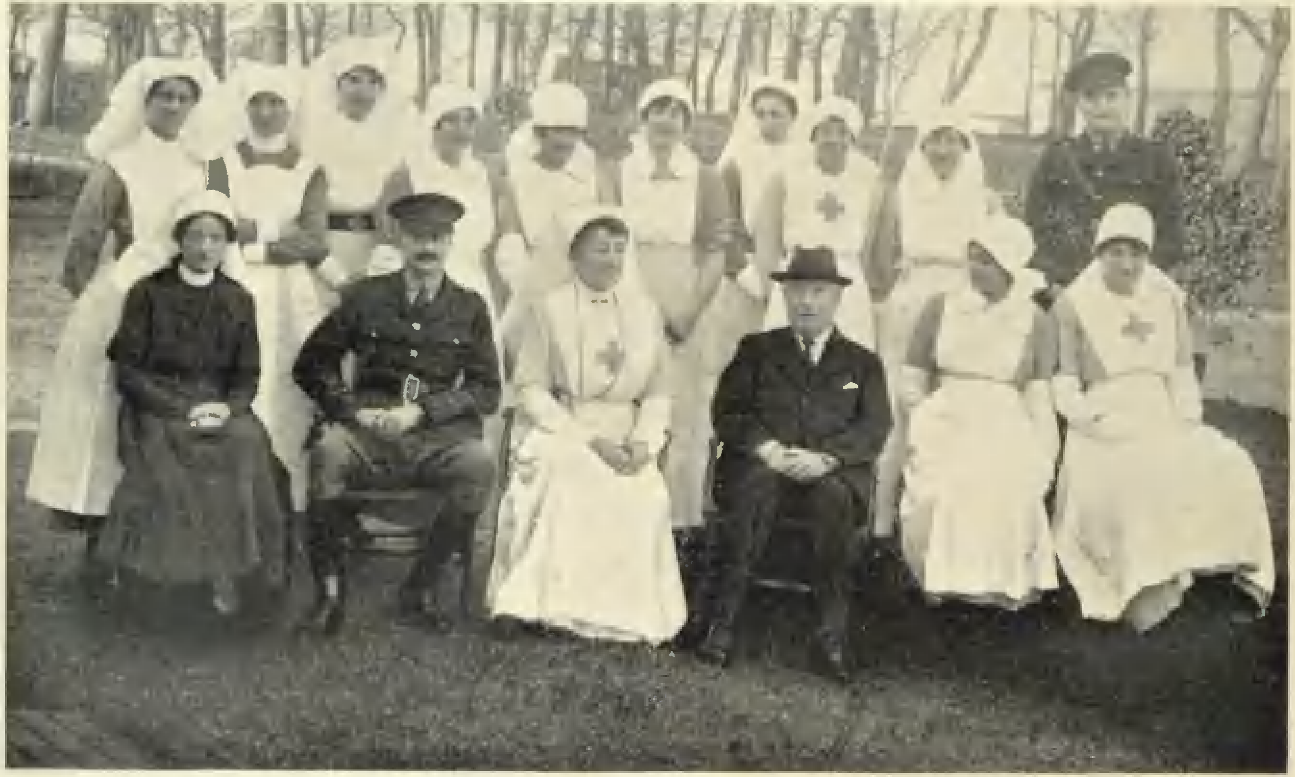
Believe me,
Yours sincerely,
F. MAURICE.

But though the responsibility lay with General Maurice and with him alone, Asquith knew him to be a man of the highest integrity and courage, and it was clear on the face of it that he had sacrificed a great career for what he believed to be a public object of supreme importance. In any case, the fact that the former Director of Military Operations had taken this extreme action "in the hope," as he said, "that Parliament might see fit to order an investigation into his statements" was a grave matter of which the House of Commons was bound to take notice, and on which the leader of the Opposition was its natural spokesman. Accordingly, on the afternoon of the day on which the letter was published Asquith asked Mr. Bonar Law what steps the Government proposed to take to examine the allegations contained in the letter.

Mr. Bonar Law replied that, "inasmuch as General Maurice's allegations affected the honour of Ministers," the Government proposed to invite two Judges to inquire into the charges, and to report as quickly as possible, and he added later a suggestion that Asquith himself should select the two Judges, to which he replied with an emphatic shake of the head. After some conversation, in which Mr. Bonar Law said that the inquiry would necessarily be held in private since the "most secret" documents would have to be examined, Asquith asked for a day to discuss the matter, and Mr. Bonar Law agreed.

During the next two days a multitude of soldiers, politicians, and anxious parents either came or wrote to Asquith begging him to stand firm and insist that General Maurice's statements should be probed to the bottom. Among them were Conservative leaders and the editor of an important Conservative newspaper. All promised their support, regardless of politics, if he would persist. Asquith had no doubt of their honesty and zeal, but he predicted, and as it turned out with truth, that they would not between them influence half a dozen votes in the House of Commons. He considered it his duty, after Mr. Bonar Law's statement, to see that the promised inquiry took place, and that it went forward on what he thought to be the right lines, but he had no illusions about the amount of support he was likely to get in the House of Commons if the question went to a division.

The debate took place two days later (9th May), when Asquith moved that the inquiry be made by a Select Committee, instead of the two Judges proposed by the Government. His objection to employing Judges to investigate matters in which political feelings were engaged was well known, and had been emphatically stated in the previous year when a similar proposal was made after the Mesopotamian Report had been presented. Proceeding on the assumption that Mr. Bonar Law had meant what he said when he told the House that an inquiry was necessary to vindicate the honour of Ministers, Asquith simply developed the argument for the alternative method of a Select Committee. As to the merits of the case he said only one sentence: "I hope, I more than hope, I believe, that in regard to some of these matters there has been genuine and



H. H. A. AT LE TRÉPORT, WITH V.A.D.'S, 26TH JANUARY, 1918

honest misunderstanding." In particular, he dismissed as absurd the idea that his motion was either in intention or in effect a vote of censure on the Government: 1918 Age 66

> "I have, since I sat in this seat, now, I think, for nearly eighteen months, so far as my memory serves me, never given an adverse vote on any question that has proceeded from the Government. I have done all that I could—all that it was in my power to do, not only in this House but outside, without withholding what I consider to be legitimate and helpful criticism—to assist the Government in the prosecution of the war, and in particular in the definition and the propagation of the great purposes both of war and of peace, for which we and our Allies are contending. Some of my friends I know—some of these I see round me—think that I have been in those matters unduly faint-hearted and mealy-mouthed. I am quite content to submit to that criticism. I know that there are people—not, I think, in this House, but outside—gifted with more imagination than charity, and with more stupidity than either, who think of me as a person who is gnawed with a hungry ambition to resume the cares and responsibilities of office. I am quite content to leave foolish imaginings of that kind to the judgment of my colleagues in this House and my countrymen outside. If I did feel it my duty, if I were to find it my duty to ask the House to censure the Government, I hope I should have the courage and the candour to do so in a direct and unequivocal form. I certainly should not have selected for that purpose a motion like this, which is limited to suggesting the desirability of an inquiry which only two days ago was admitted from that bench to be appropriate and expedient, which, so far as its scope is concerned, would be confined to the examination of two or three very simple issues of fact, and from which the Government, as I am sure they think they would—I do not want in any way to prejudge that matter—emerge not with diminished, but with enhanced, authority and prestige." (House of Commons, 9th May, 1918.)

If a leader of the Opposition had any function at all in time of war it would be difficult to imagine a more moderate and conciliatory manner of discharging it. But to take it in this spirit was by no means Mr. Lloyd George's cue at this moment. In the interval between the publication of General Maurice's letter and the debate the Government had repented of their promise to hold an inquiry, and their object now was to find plausible reasons for its withdrawal. The occasion was one which demanded all the Prime Minister's resources, but he was equal to it. Presenting himself as an injured man, and declaring that since the previous Tuesday it had been made "perfectly clear from the action of the Press" that no decision by any secret tribunal would ever be accepted, he swept aside all that Mr. Bonar Law had said two days earlier about the honour of Ministers, the necessity of judicial inquiry, and the examination of most secret documents; launched out into a defence of

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himself and claimed the verdict here and now from the House of Commons.

III

The reader must form his own judgment from what has gone before, and from the numerous disclosures made since the War upon the general merits of the controversy between Mr. Lloyd George and General Maurice.[1] So far as the subsequent division was a free

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[1] The actual figures supplied by the War Office on 7th May, i.e. two days before Mr. Lloyd George's speech on 9th May, were:

BRITISH FORCES IN FRANCE

Date	Fighting Troops		Non-Fighting Troops		*Labour		Total
	British	*Coloured (Indian Cavalry)*	*British*	*Coloured*	*British*	*Coloured*	*Effectives*
Jan. 1917	1,069,831	8,876	217,533	2,704	—	—	1,298,944
Jan. 1918	969,283	11,544	295,334	2,256	190,197	108,203	1,576,817
OVERSEAS DOMINION CONTINGENT							
Jan. 1917	204,989	—	22,249	—	—	—	227,238
Jan. 1918	217,205	—	56,945	—	—	—	274,150
TOTAL BRITISH AND DOMINION CONTINGENTS							
Jan. 1917	1,274,820	8,876	239,782	2,704	—	—	1,526,182
Jan. 1918	1,186,488	11,544	322,279	2,256	190,197	108,203	1,850,967

(* Labour Corps did not exist till the middle of 1917.)

According to the authors of *Sir Douglas Haig's Command* (I, 29), "The bayonet and sabre strength of the British Army had dropped from 612,000 at the end of 1917 to 582,000 at the time of the German offensive. . . . In spite of the oncoming German offensive and the recent extension of the British front to Barisis, our bayonet and sabre strength on Mar. 20, 1918, the day before the German assault, was actually 96,000 below what it had been at the end of 1916." The emphasis here is on the "bayonet and sabre strength," but military opinion seems generally to have disallowed Mr. Lloyd George's claim that Labour battalions and Army Service Corps, etc. may properly be included in the "fighting strength" of the army, and his contention that it is a reflection on them to make a distinction between these services and the fighting strength. In March 1918, the Labour battalions included 190,000 white and 108,000 native unarmed labourers.

Between January and March 1918 the Indian Cavalry (11,544) were broken up and transferred to Palestine, and there was a further large drop in fighting strength. Between December 1916 and March 1918 there was a drop of 17,000 in British and Indian cavalry, and 100,000 in British infantry, a drop larger than the whole of our army at Mons.

All labour, white and coloured, was unarmed.

On the substantial question whether the fighting force was reinforced as it might or should have been, the reader may be referred to Sir William Robertson's *Soldiers and Statesmen*, chapter on "Man-Power," I, p. 290 *et seq.*; *Sir Douglas Haig's Command*, II, pp. 1–44; *Field-Marshal Earl Haig*, by Brig.-Gen. John Charteris, Chap. XXI; *Field-Marshal Sir Henry Wilson*, II, pp. 42–70. The same authorities will also help to determine how far the Versailles Council influenced the question

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expression of opinion, Mr. Lloyd George carried the day on his assertion that the statement he had made to the House was founded on information supplied to him by the Department of Military Operations, for which General Maurice himself was responsible,[1] but in the light of our present knowledge Mr. Churchill's opinion that "the actual merits of the controversy were scarcely discussed"[2] will assuredly not be disputed. The effect nevertheless was instantaneous and decisive. Mr. Lloyd George had succeeded in turning Asquith's motion on procedure into a vote of censure upon himself and had put the House of Commons in a position in which it could not accept this motion without destroying the Government at a most critical moment in the War.

It was undoubtedly a dazzling Parliamentary performance and it had the effect, possibly not undesigned, of throwing the debate into confusion. Asquith had confined himself to the question of procedure, and though by this time he was well armed with the facts, he certainly would not have consented to enter into a dispute about them with Mr. Lloyd George on the floor of the House of Commons at that moment. On the other hand tempers were running high at the end of Mr. Lloyd George's speech, which many of its hearers on both sides of the House thought to be an evasion of the real issue, and the appearance of being browbeaten into withdrawing a resolution which merely proposed an alternative way of doing what the Government itself had declared to be necessary was extremely repugnant to Asquith. His own mind was made up on the spot to stand to his guns. But from this point onwards the debate was seriously mishandled, and the division was taken before any reply had been made from the Liberal front bench, or any clear guidance given to Liberal members by their leaders. In the end the only serious

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of the extension of the British line. Mr. Bonar Law was evidently misinformed when he said that it was "not dealt with at all by the Versailles Council," though it is literally and technically true that they did not decide it. What happened was that the question of the extension of the British front was referred by the Governments to the Military Advisers of the Supreme War Council. In the event General Haig came to an independent agreement with General Petain, which was confirmed by the Supreme War Council. See General Maurice's *Intrigues of the War*, Appendix, pp. 37–42.

[1] General Maurice explained afterwards that this information was supplied on 18th April, after he had laid down his duties as Director of Military Operations, and that by a mistake in it, "the whole strength of our armies in Italy was included in the strength of our armies in France." This mistake, he says, was "discovered shortly afterwards," and reported to the Prime Minister's Private Secretary, but apparently not in time to prevent its being used by the Prime Minister in the debate of 9th May. It may be added that Mr. Lloyd George's original statement was made on 9th April, while General Maurice was still Director of Military Operations. He could, therefore, in this speech at all events, not have been misled by the mistaken return of 18th April.

[2] *World Crisis*, III, p. 422.

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criticism of the Prime Minister on the merits of the case was made by two Conservative members, Sir Henry Page Croft and Major Archer Shee, who undoubtedly expressed the real opinions of large numbers of their own party. But these were speeches, not votes, and by a somewhat ironic turn of events it was left to the 106 Liberal members who followed Asquith into the Lobby in support of his motion to express in the division what at the time and later was the predominant military opinion of the proceedings of this day.

It was one of those occasions on which no one seemed to know exactly what had happened. The prearranged speakers did not rise ; safety first became the impulse of the unguided House ; some members seemed hardly to know in which Lobby they had voted. To understand it one must get back into the atmosphere of war, and the something approaching terror which afflicted average mortals when the Government cracked its whip. A clever tactician who foresaw the use which might be made of this incident would no doubt have avoided a division by withdrawing the resolution on the ground that public discussion was impossible at that moment, and thus have thrown on the Government the onus of burking an inquiry which they themselves had declared to be necessary. Asquith was not a clever tactician, and the last thing he desired at that moment was to discover a tactical means of escape from a proposition to which he attached serious importance. But it certainly never occurred to him that this debate and division could by any ingenuity be turned to the purpose for which it was afterwards used, and least of all that it could be seized by the Government as a pretext for dividing the Liberal party into "sheep and goats," and making a concerted effort to drive the latter into outer darkness.

That stroke was held in reserve for six months—six months during which Asquith and his supporters in Parliament gave unswerving support to the Government in all that concerned the conduct of the War, and joined with them in exhortation to effort and endurance. During these months Sir Douglas Haig was alone among officers of his own rank in seeing the prospect of a decision in 1918, and he acted on his belief while Foch and all the other high military authorities were planning for the final blow in 1919 or 1920. For a large part of this time, as we now know, the real issues which lay behind the Maurice Debate were still being fought out behind the scenes. All through the fearful conflict on the Western front the idea of sending Divisions to the East lingered in the mind of the Government and their chosen military adviser, Sir Henry Wilson,[1]

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[1] *Wilson*, II, p. 119.

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now Chief of the Imperial General Staff. At the end of July this authority advised them that it would be unwise to attempt to gain a decisive victory until 1920, that the main offensive campaign should not be opened before July 1919, and that in the meantime "our most urgent consideration" was "the establishment of British control on the Caspian and the security of our lines of communication from Bagdad."[1] Three days later, according to the same witness, "practically all the Prime Ministers, i.e. Lloyd George, Borden, Hughes (but not so much), Smuts, Massey, and Milner were of opinion that "we cannot beat the Boches on the Western front," and so, he adds, "they go wandering about looking for laurels."[2] Under the influence of these emotions and advised by the soldier who thought the "most urgent consideration to be the establishment of British control on the Caspian," the War Cabinet, on 31st August, sent their Commander-in-Chief, just when he was about to open the last great offensive which carried the allied armies to victory on the Western front, a message warning him, as Mr. Churchill says, "of the grave consequences which would result from a further heavy blood drain."[3] Seldom, if ever, can a Commander-in-Chief have received such a communication from his Government on the eve of battle, but the War Cabinet, it seems, was still on 31st August in the mood which had caused it to despair of victory and withhold reinforcements in the early months of the year.

It is scarcely fanciful, on looking back, to regard this telegram as the last expiring effort of the struggle to "alter the direction of the War" in which Mr. Lloyd George appeared to have won the decisive victory in December 1916. By an initiative which was entirely his own, and which appears to have obtained only the reluctant consent even of our French allies, the British Commander-in-Chief took the issue out of the hands of the Cabinet and won the series of resounding victories on the Western front which were the main factor in bringing the war to a conclusion in November 1918. If in the end the break-up of the German Coalition started in the East, this event, as Mr. Churchill tells us,[4] was "not induced by local circumstances. It resulted from the consternation which followed the defeat of the German armies in France."[5]

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[1] Memorandum by Sir Henry Wilson, 28th July, quoted by Major.-Gen. Charteris, *Field-Marshal Earl Haig*.

[2] *Field-Marshal Sir H. Wilson*, II, 110.

[3] For other details see *Haig's Command*, II, 269; *Field-Marshal Earl Haig*, 356.

[4] *World Crisis*, III, p. 517.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 536.

CHAPTER LV

THE COUPON ELECTION

Asquith and the King—The offensive on the Home Front—Asquith and Mr. Lloyd George—Plans for the Coupon Election—The sacrifice of Liberals—Sir George Younger's requirements—Choosing the victims—Distributing the Coupon—The alleged conspiracy—Asquith's reply—An orgy of Chauvinism—The extinction of the Liberal Party—Asquith's defeat. J. A. S.

1918 Age 66 ASQUITH was not in the public eye on Armistice Day 1918, but there were some who remembered him. A telegram from the King came before the morning was out: "I look back with gratitude to your wise counsel and calm resolve in the days when great issues had to be decided resulting in our entry into the war"; and in a telegram to his wife, Queen Alexandra said: "In the great rejoicings which we share with you and the people all over our Empire, we do not forget your husband to-day." "No man," said the King to Mrs. Asquith a few days later when they were lunching at Buckingham Palace, "ever had a better or wiser friend than I had, and have, in your husband." A few days later Asquith himself had the opportunity of paying his tribute to the King in seconding the address of congratulation moved by the Prime Minister in the House of Commons. He said:

> "When history comes to tell the tale of these four years, it will recount a story the like of which is not to be found in any epic in any literature. It is and will remain by itself as a record of everything humanity can dare or endure—of the extremes of possible heroism and, we must add, of possible baseness, and, above and beyond all, the slow moving but in the end irresistible power of a great ideal.
>
> The old world has been laid waste. Principalities and Powers, to all appearances inviolable and invincible, which seemed to dominate a large part of the families of mankind, lie in the dust. All things have become new.
>
> In this great and cleansing purging it has been the privilege of our country to play her part—a part worthy of a people who have learned themselves beforehand the lesson to practise the example of ordered freedom. The time has not come to distribute praise between those who in civil life and naval and military action, have won this great victory, but, as my right honourable friend has well said, we can anticipate that task by rendering at once a heartfelt, unstinted tribute to the occupant of the Throne.
>
> I had the privilege to be Prime Minister when His Majesty ascended the Throne, and I continued to hold that office until more than two years

had passed of the progress of the war. There is no one who can bear testimony—first-hand testimony—more authentic or more heartfelt than I do to the splendid example which His Majesty has set in time of peace, as well as in time of war, in the discharge of every one, day by day, of the responsible duties which fall to the Sovereign of this Empire. In the crash of Thrones, built, some of them, on unrighteousness propped up in other cases by a brittle framework of convention, the Throne of this country stands unshaken, broad-based on the people's will. It has been reinforced to a degree which it is impossible to measure, by the living example of our Sovereign and his gracious Consort, who have always felt and shown by their life and by this conduct that they are there not to be ministered unto, but to minister.

As the right hon. gentleman said, monarchies in these days are held, if they continue to be held, not by the shadowy claim of any so-called Divine right, not, as has been the case with the Hapsburg and Hohenzollerns, by any power of dividing and dominating popular forces and popular will, not by pedigree and not by traditions; they are held, and can only be held, by the highest form of public service; by understanding, by sympathy with the common lot and by devotion to the common weal. There are some lines of one of our old poets which are perhaps worth recalling, as they sum up and express the feelings of many of us to-day:

> 'The glories of our blood and State
> Are shadows, not substantial things,
> There is no armour against fate,
> Death lays his icy hand on kings.'

And at the end of these fine lines he adds, what we in these testing times in Great Britain have seen and proved to be the secret and the safeguard of our Monarchy:

> 'Only the actions of the just
> Smell sweet and blossom in the dust.'"

II

Late in October or early in November the leaders of the Coalition decided to follow up the victory over the enemy by a grand offensive on what was then called the "Home Front." On 2nd November—nine days before the Armistice—Mr. Lloyd George wrote a letter to Mr. Bonar Law[1] in which he declared himself to be convinced that there ought to be a general election, and that the "sooner it can be arranged, subject to the exigencies of the military position,

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[1] The idea of a dissolution in which the leaders of two parties should combine to wipe out the opposition was apparently familiar to Mr. Bonar Law, for Lord Beaverbrook quotes him as having threatened Mr. Winston Churchill with such a dissolution in November 1916, and Mr. Churchill as having replied that such a threat in the middle of the war was "the most terribly immoral thing he had ever heard of." At another stage Mr. Bonar Law is represented as having feared that Asquith would retaliate on him with a "fatal dissolution," if he resigned. *Politicians and the War*, II, pp. 106 and 124.

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the better." In this letter, which Mr. Bonar Law read to a meeting of his party ten days later, the lines were laid down for the co-operation of Liberal and Conservative Coalitionists in an appeal to the country to "return candidates who undertake to support the present Government, not only to prosecute the war to its final end and negotiate the peace but to deal with the problems of reconstruction which must immediately arise directly an Armistice is signed."

This plan was kept secret during the next few days, but there were uneasy rumours that something unexpected was about to happen, and in order to reassure themselves, a deputation from the National Liberal Federation, the Scottish Liberal Federation, and the Manchester Liberal Federation waited on Mr. Lloyd George and urged a *rapprochement* between his Liberal followers and the official Liberals under Asquith. Since he was at this time negotiating with Mr. Bonar Law on the basis of his letter, he was naturally unable to give them a satisfactory reply. A little later Asquith saw him in his room in the House of Commons, and an account of what passed between them was furnished eleven years later in a letter to *The Times* by Mr. Vivian Phillipps, who was Asquith's Private Secretary in 1918, and who saw him immediately after this interview. The letter was written in reply to a statement made by Mr. Lloyd George after Asquith's death that he offered him "the Lord Chancellorship and the opportunity of attending the Peace Conference" and that Asquith declined it, but it may be taken as covering the whole interview:

> "The statement is a charge against Mr. Asquith that at a moment of tremendous importance for the nation and the world he refused to help. I was in Mr. Asquith's intimate counsels at the time. I saw him in his room at the House of Commons within five minutes of the interview with Mr. Lloyd George. I was aware that the interview was taking place because the Manchester Liberals had expressed to Mr. Lloyd George the desire that an effort should be made to bring Mr. Asquith and himself together before the election. When Mr. Asquith returned to his room after seeing Mr. Lloyd George I asked him what had happened. He told me that Mr. Lloyd George had inquired whether he would be willing to join the Coalition Government, and that he had replied that circumstances made that impossible. He added that he had told Mr. Lloyd George, however, that he would be willing to 'lend a hand'—that was his phrase—'as one of the British delegates to the Peace Conference.' I said to him, 'and what did Mr. Lloyd George say to that?' and he replied, 'he made no response.'"[1]

Mrs. Asquith in her *Autobiography*[2] has added some details of this interview with Mr. Lloyd George:

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[1] *The Times*, 8th March, 1929.

[2] II, pp. 302–303.

"Just before the General Election of December 1918, Henry was asked to go to the Prime Minister's room in the House of Commons. 1918 Age 66

Upon his return he told me what had occurred. He had been received with a friendliness that amounted to enthusiasm and asked where he stood. Mr. Lloyd George then said:

'I understand you don't wish to take a post under the Government.'

To which my husband answered that that was so; and added that the only service he thought he could render the Government would be if he were to go to Versailles, as from what he knew both of President Wilson and M. Clemenceau he was pretty sure they knew little of International Law or finance, and that these two problems would be found all-important in view of fixing future frontiers and the havoc the war was likely to create in all the Foreign Exchanges.

At this Mr. Lloyd George looked a little confused. He was walking up and down the room, and in knocking up against a chair a pile of loose books were thrown upon the ground. Hastily looking at his watch and stooping down to pick up the books, he said he would consider my husband's proposal. Nothing more was said; the interview was over, and my husband never heard another word upon the matter."

The question of Asquith's participation in the Peace Conference will be dealt with later, but it need hardly be said that if Mr. Lloyd George seriously intended to invite him to join the Government, his answer was in the circumstances a foregone conclusion. Even if joining the Government had been congenial to him, it is certain that he would never have consented to the sacrifice of colleagues and supporters which the electioneering plan of the Coalition leaders required. He was, as always, "willing to lend a hand" in the business of the Nation, but nothing would have induced him to seek shelter for himself at the sacrifice of the Liberal Party.

Liberal politicians had given little thought to their position since December 1916. Like the rest of their countrymen they had been absorbed in the war, and they had permitted their machinery to be dismantled and turned over to war purposes on what they supposed to be an honourable understanding between parties that none of them would be prejudiced by a suspension of domestic politics during the war. Reasonable warning and liberty for political Associations and individuals to consider their position and make their choice seemed to be elementary fair play, if political warfare was to be resumed. Otherwise, the new Parliament would consist of men selected to suit their own purpose by leaders who for the time being controlled the machine of Government and could spring a surprise upon the electors.

This, it soon appeared, was what Mr. Lloyd George and Mr. Bonar Law intended the new Parliament to be. In their original scheme Labour was to have come in, but the Labour Party by a

1918 Age 66 majority of more than two to one decided to " resume its independence," and the Labour Ministers accordingly withdrew from the Government. This left the Liberal and Conservative Coalitionists free to partition the constituencies between themselves with all but complete certainty that their combined forces would in the great majority be strong enough to extinguish opposition. At any time this combined pressure would have been tremendous, but at a moment when there were no political issues and the Government was appealing to the electors to strengthen its hands for the coming Peace Conference, it was bound to be irresistible.

But one thing was necessary for the complete success of this plan, and this was that Mr. Lloyd George should make the concessions required by his Conservative colleagues. It was not to be supposed that they would consent to prolong the Coalition with the balance of parties in the existing House, where the Unionist Party was in a minority of more than 100. At the most critical moments Mr. Bonar Law had never forgotten the interests of his party and he had no motive for neglecting them when the war was over. It was, from his point of view, a natural demand that the number of Conservatives in the new House should be largely increased and the number of Liberals proportionately reduced. It was presumably a heavy sacrifice for a Liberal Prime Minister to make, but having decided that it was a national necessity to prolong the life of the Coalition, Mr. Lloyd George was bound to face it.

III

A month after the election in a speech to his constituents, Sir George Younger, the principal organiser of the Unionist Party, made a frank disclosure of the method pursued :

> When a General Election was resolved upon the Unionist members in the House of Commons who had supported the Government since 1917 and the Liberal members who had also supported the Government coalesced with a common programme and a common object. That settled right away 400 contests. . . . The Prime Minister had no organisation and naturally he had not many candidates ready and could only therefore contest a certain number of seats. He kept all the seats he could contest, and as he (Sir George Younger) occupied the position of Chairman of the Unionist Party, he was asked to furnish a certain number of candidates, and naturally he recommended Unionists and not Radicals (Alloa, Jan. 23, 1919).

As it turned out the four hundred contests " settled right away " covered practically all the seats for which the sitting Unionist members were seeking re-election or for which Unionist candidates had been chosen, but only a specially selected number of seats held by Liberals or to be contested by Liberal candidates. In all the others, the Liberal members seeking re-election or the Liberal candidates seeking election were marked down as "opponents of the Government," and candidates to oppose them were "furnished" partly by Mr. Lloyd George, but in the majority of cases by Sir George Younger. In this way the Conservative wing of the Coalition obtained a guarantee that a large majority of the members supporting the Coalition in the new House would be members of their party.

Though obviously effective for its purpose this method required two principal sacrifices on the part of Mr. Lloyd George. He had first of all to break with the official organisation of the Liberal Party which left local Associations free to select their own candidates, and to take this part of the business—or such as remained after Mr. Bonar Law and Sir George Younger had taken their share—into his own hands. This in itself was a sufficiently serious departure from Liberal tradition and practice, but he had next the even more difficult and invidious task of dividing the Liberals members into sheep and goats, those who were supposed to have supported and those who were supposed to have opposed the Government. On the face of it there was no obvious line of demarcation. With the exception of a few honest pacifists, the whole Liberal Party had supported the Government in the conduct of the war, and refrained from criticisms on many occasions on which it would have been well justified. The Second Coalition had in fact been far more indulgently treated by the House of Commons than either of the preceding Governments.

But, if lots were not to be cast, some cause or pretext had to be found; and at this moment the Maurice debate and division leapt to life again. This was the solitary occasion—the occasion of Asquith's motion for a Select Committee in preference to the two Judges proposed by Mr. Bonar Law—on which any considerable number of Liberals had recorded a vote against the Government; and it now appeared that Mr. Lloyd George and Mr. Bonar Law had for the past six months been nursing their grievance on this occasion and were determined to be even with the 106—or as many of them as were candidates for the new Parliament—who had voted for Asquith's motion on 9th May. The two leaders took lofty ground. They were acting from no mean or vindictive motive but from national necessity. The times, they said, demanded not ordinary politicians, criticising and opposing a Government and turning against it at a critical moment, but "reliable" men, men who would pledge themselves to support the Coalition not only until the Peace Treaty was signed, but for the full term of the coming Parliament. For the selection of these men something more was needed than the ordinary free choice of the local Associations; they must be certified by the leaders of the Coalition as the men whom they wanted and whom the nation needed at this supreme moment.

The certificate took the form of a letter signed by the two leaders (which Asquith immortalised by dubbing it the "coupon") attesting the qualifications of the candidate; and all Liberals who had voted for Asquith's motion substituting a Select Committee for two Judges as the proper mean of inquiring into General Maurice's statements were struck off the list of the qualified, and their places filled either by Unionists or more acceptable Liberals, generally the former.[1] This at one stroke consolidated the Coalition and divided the Liberal vote.

It then became necessary to paint in lively colours the iniquity of the proscribed and the necessity of filling their places with "reliable" men. Mr. Lloyd George was more than equal to this part of the task. "It was no use," he told the country, "having a small majority, and what is worse than a small majority; an unreliable majority, a majority that is not quite sure what it will do, about which you are not quite sure when you are in difficulties that it will turn on you." By this time the Prime Minister had persuaded himself that the Maurice division was a "conspiracy" to thwart the Government in achieving unity of command:

> "We have had some experience of difficulties in the last two years, and in particular—the difficulty about securing unity of command. No one doubts that if you had not secured it this war would have been going on, and not going on well, and yet we had two or three Parliamentary crises about that. One of them was in the very middle of the worst and most critical time we had. We were giving the whole of our time to sending material and guns to the front, and to the organising of transport and carrying of food. And you must remember that we carried in British ships alone one million American troops. When we were organising all that there was a Parliamentary conspiracy to overthrow the Government. The Irish members were begged to come over, though they were organising their own little conspiracy to prevent troops from being raised in Ireland to assist our Army.[2] And yet they were asked to come over

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[1] How the "coupon" plan worked may be seen from the illustration of the London seats. In the Parliament about to be dissolved, Liberals held 26 and Unionists 33 of the London seats. For the new Parliament, the coupon was given to 13 Liberals and 46 Unionists.

[2] The Irish Parliamentary Party, with insignificant exceptions, had given loyal support to the Government in the war, and their "little conspiracy" consisted only in warning it that the application of compulsory military service would be unwise and impracticable in the existing state of feeling in that country.

1918
Age 66

> to help overthrow a Government that was in the midst of a crisis while wrestling for victory. I cannot trust that sort of business. If the country wants that class of man the country can choose them, but, believe me, it will be impossible for us to get through the great task before us. Forgive me for talking quite clearly. It is better to do so when we are face to face. I am told that we ought to accept candidates who are chosen by caucuses without demur. I see that stated this morning, but I think we are entitled to know something about what these men are going to do. No one will attempt to dictate to the constituencies, and if you get any letters signed by Mr. Bonar Law or myself they are simply expressions of our opinions as to the men who will give steady support. As British citizens we are entitled to express our opinion on a subject of that sort. In a free country even a Prime Minister may enjoy that privilege." (Wolverhampton, Nov. 23, 1918.)

The "unreliable" Liberals thus found themselves not only excluded from the list of certified candidates, but branded as "conspirators" who had plotted against their country at a most critical moment of its fortunes.

IV

Asquith answered the Prime Minister in a speech at Huddersfield a few days later: "If there was a conspiracy he himself," he said, "must have been chief conspirator, for it was his motion to which reference was made."—"It was a motion made by me, and I must say at once that there is no act in the whole of my Parliamentary life, now extending for more than thirty years, for which I am less repentant and ashamed." After quoting his own words in the Maurice debate—that "he could not be a party to any proceeding which might have the effect of preventing those who were responsible to the nation from extricating the greatest of causes from the gravest of perils"—he went on:

> "And yet this was the time when I was supposed to be hatching a conspiracy to overthrow the Government. I would not go back to this simply because a baseless charge has been made, but because it illustrates the meaning of 'a reliable majority.' General Maurice, a most distinguished officer who had been Director of Military Operations, one of the highest and most responsible posts in the whole Army, early in May wrote entirely on his own responsibility a letter challenging statements made by Ministers as to the strength of our army in France. At the end of March the Prime Minister tells us that this was a crisis about unity of command. It had nothing whatever to do with unity of command in the sense of a single appointment, and the history of that will have to be written some day. Unity of command came into existence under the stress of battle a few days after the German offensive began. At the time of the Maurice letter it was an accomplished fact, and it had been

in existence for nearly six weeks. It is a complete travesty, and I venture to say a grotesque travesty, to say that allegation had anything to do with the unity of command."

He next pointed out that the demand for inquiry did not come from the Liberals; the Inquiry was proffered by the Government themselves and he had merely requested that instead of being held by two Judges, it should be held by a small Select Committee of the House of Commons representing all parties in the State:

> "Now there is no reason in the world why the Government, which had admitted the necessity of the inquiry, should not also have accepted that mode of procedure. They proceeded, most absurdly, to treat it as a vote of censure. The demand for an inquiry, which the Government themselves started two days before, was treated as amounting to a vote of want of confidence and censure, and now we are told that unless you get a pledge-bound majority in the next House of Commons the same thing may recur. The Prime Minister is horrified that the Irish members were invited to attend the division. Why not? It is a question of fair play. If the Government makes the question of fair play the issue of confidence the responsibility, and the whole responsibility, is theirs. Just see what that comes to. Anybody who allows this Coalition label or ticket to be affixed to him in the next House of Commons would have to do without justice or reason, and would have to suppress his judgment and his instinct of fairness, otherwise he might be told he had betrayed his constituents. I would rather never sit in the House of Commons again—much as I prize it—I would rather not sit there under conditions so humiliating." (Huddersfield, Nov. 28, 1918.)

By this time the "conspiracy" seemed to have become an obsession with Mr. Lloyd George and he painted the iniquity of it in blacker and blacker colours. "The Government to be flung out, confidence given to Germany, confusion created here, invaluable time lost,"[1] and much else that in the cool light of history seems mere sound and fury.

V

Starting on this note the election became an orgy of chauvinism, the details of which it would be unseemly to revive. On the day after the Armistice, when the Prime Minister had summoned his Liberal followers to Downing Street, he had spoken to them of a peace "based on the fundamental principles of righteousness," of the need of putting away "base, sordid, squalid ideas of vengeance and of avarice." Within three weeks he had promised to prosecute the ex-Kaiser, to punish German officers, to expel or exclude Germans from Great Britain, to "exact the last penny we can get out of Germany up to the limit of her capacity."[1] This on the one hand, and on the other lavish promises of a new world to the returning soldier. This effort was for the moment entirely successful, and in the result independent Liberalism was all but extinguished. Large numbers of electors, while objecting strongly to the methods of the Government, yet felt that they could not withdraw their support from it on the eve of the Peace Conference.[2]

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[1] Newcastle, 29th November, 1918.

Among other things the compact between the Prime Minister and his Conservative allies required that all his old colleagues of Cabinet rank should be proscribed, and though he spoke of the pain which it gave him to "sever his relations with his old comrades in arms," Mr. Lloyd George faced it with composure as an integral part of his scheme. Asquith made no complaint on this score; he had made it abundantly clear that whatever it might be, he would share the fate of his comrades in arms and loyal supporters in Parliament. But when it was known that he had lost his seat in East Fife there were many thousands of quiet people in all parts of the country who thought their own thoughts about the extraordinary lack of generosity which, after his long service to the nation, had exposed him to this fate.

At this distance of time, the election of 1918 has very few apologists. The necessity of holding it immediately after the Armistice remains still a pure assertion; the methods adopted were calamitous for the "Peace without vengeance or avarice," which the Prime Minister himself had advocated. At a moment when it was of supreme importance that Great Britain should be free to play her traditional part of moderator after victory, her Chief Representative entered the Peace Conference with his platform oratory on record against him, and his "reliable majority" waiting to call him to order if he should seem to abate what they conceived to be his pledges. He was finally at the mercy of the men who had left him in the highest position on the condition that they constituted the majority of his party, and before the Parliament had run its course he had many opportunities of judging of their "reliability."

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[1] Bristol, 11th December. Mr. Lloyd George said that the bill was 24,000 millions, but that having consulted his financial advisers he could not honestly encourage the hope that we should get so much. "If Germany has a greater capacity she must pay up to the very last penny."

[2] In the final result 526 Coalitionists, 63 Labour members, 33 Independent Liberals, 80 Irish, and 5 Independents were returned to the new Parliament. Since the Irish did not attend, the Coalition had a working majority of 420.

CHAPTER LVI

RALLYING THE REMNANT

Facing the blow—Asquith and the Peace Conference—Reasons for not inviting him—A tour abroad—The Oxford and Cambridge Commission—Writing in retirement—His style as writer and speaker—Return to Parliament—The Paisley Campaign—Back in the House of Commons—Advocates Dominion Home Rule for Ireland—Warning voices—The Black and Tans—Mr. Lloyd George's Carnarvon speech—Asquith's answer—Establishment of the Irish Free State—Break-up of the Coalition. J. A. S. and C. A.

1919–1922
Age 66–70

On Saturday, 28th December, 1918, President Wilson was entertained by the Lord Mayor at a luncheon at the Mansion House, and Asquith sat at the high table not far from Mr. Lloyd George. The speeches were barely over when a slip was passed along from the Reporters' table to one of the guests to say that Asquith had been defeated in East Fife[1] That he should be compelled to be just there at that moment seemed to this guest a peculiar manifestation of the mocking spirit which so often haunts the great in their careers.

Asquith mercifully did not hear the news until he got back to Cavendish Square, and then it fell on him as a crushing and unexpected blow. He had never seriously thought it possible that his constituents, so staunch and loyal for all the thirty-two years of his parliamentary life, would desert him at this time. Now, as always, he had relied on them to hold the fort in East Fife while he led the fight in other parts of the country. It was a shock, and a rude one, to find that they too had succumbed, but he rallied from it with his usual stoicism, and for the next six weeks settled down to a quiet life at The Wharf, coming occasionally to London and helping the shattered party to pick up the fragments. For a time his mind turned from politics and began to make plans for a period of browsing and travel, reading old books and seeing new countries, which had been a dream in former years. There is a glimpse of him at the beginning of January lunching with Sir Robert Hudson, Secretary to the National Liberal Federation, in company with two or three of his colleagues—"Asquith so quiet," said his host,[1] "so cool and high-minded, entirely without malice or rancour, so unlike——;" but his mind was turning away from politics to the compensations which life had still to offer. To his wife who had in the meantime gone abroad for her health he wrote on the last day of January:

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[1] The polling took place before Christmas, but owing to the necessity of collecting the soldiers' votes, the results were not declared till 28th December.

> It is sad that we cannot spend your birthday together, but I am sure you were wise, both for your own sake and Elizabeth's[2] to start as soon as you did. You know that I wish for you every blessing that earth or heaven can give. I see no reason why we should not be happy. I am in my 67th year, and looking back (while I think worse of men's brains, and of their hearts and characters than I once did) I have not many grievances against Fortune. Few men have had a life more crowded with interests, both big and small: and none that I know has been so nearly blessed in his home. If we live to May 10th we shall celebrate our Silver Wedding Day: and I will lay any odds anyone likes that there is not on the face of the globe a couple—man and wife—who have made as much of 25 years in every possible way.
>
> Puff[3] and I had a charming farewell: his is the most perfect character I have ever known, or ever shall. . . . I only pray that our complete and unique comradeship may continue to the end.

"Asquith nearly lost you the War. Are you going to let him spoil the Peace?" had been one of the catch-cries of the Coalition during the election. It has already been recorded that, though he rejected the idea of joining the Coalition Government, he had offered to "lend a hand" at the Peace Conference, and up to the end of December he still thought it probable that he would be invited. He asked me to come and see him one of these days and discussed the matter for an hour with all its pros and cons, but in the end said quite frankly, that, if invited, he was resolved to go. He saw all the objections—that he might seem to be involving himself with the Coalition and deserting old friends, that the atmosphere was unfavourable to the kind of peace that he desired, that his voice and vote might count for little in the throng—but the cause was of supreme importance, and precisely because the Liberal voices were few and feeble at that moment it seemed to him his duty to reinforce them, if the opportunity offered. It did not offer: the "hard-faced men" who a few weeks later were to summon the Prime Minister back from Paris and hold him to his election pledge to make the enemy pay to the uttermost farthing were already on guard lest the peace should be "spoilt," and patriotic newspapers protested that the elections had deprived Asquith of his title to be a representative literature. But for certain classes of composition which afford a meeting ground for rhetoric and letters, it was almost ideally fitted, and he excelled in rectorial addresses, in obituary tributes and in ceremonial eloquence. Of his published works *Occasional Addresses* contained many notable examples of this kind; and where the subject interests him, as for instance in his discourse on "Biography," or on Scaliger, his language escapes from its oratorical fetters and develops an easy play of humour, of fancy and of anecdote.

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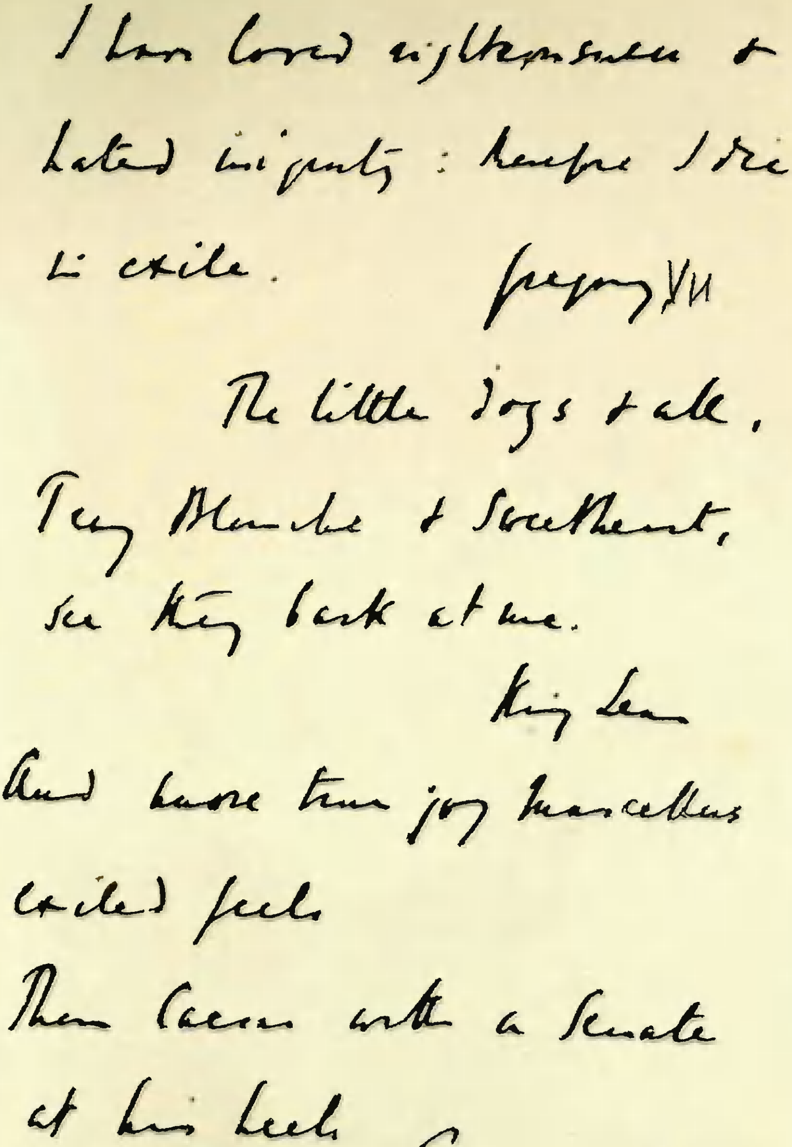
[1] *Sir Robert Hudson, a Memoir*, p. 161.

[2] Elizabeth Asquith, afterwards Princess Bibesco.

[3] Anthony Asquith.

His absorption in law and politics necessarily relegated authorship to the position of a πάρεργον and his earlier and shorter works present him not as a specialist either in writing or in any particular subject but as what Bacon calls a "full man," whose accumulated intellectual resources overflow by way of a diversion into occasional pieces and miscellaneous essays. *Studies and Sketches*, a collection of these deserves a wider circulation than it has attained. In his last years, spurred by financial exigency, he wrote some longish books, *The Genesis of the War*, *Fifty Years of Parliament*, and *Memories and Reflections*. Of these the first two owe their interest largely to the almost unique political experience which lies behind them. In the *Genesis of the War* he is speaking of events which he not only knew (if anyone did) from the inside, but had largely helped to mould; and his presentation of the facts is what one would expect—accurate, judicial, incisive, and the more weighty for its studied avoidance of the dramatic. *Fifty Years of Parliament* is enlivened with many sallies of quiet humour and pointed anecdote; but the author resists the temptation of making a case or improving on history. *Memories and Reflections*, ostensibly his autobiography, is in substance an unwrought mass of material, of which death forestalled the coherent arrangement. Even if time had permitted its completion, it would not have served in any real sense to reveal the man. It is in the main an unemotional record of the external facts of his life, mingled with much matter which albeit of great public interest contributes little towards a disclosure of his character. He suffered as an autobiographer from one of the most fatal of disabilities—an insufficient interest in himself. He was too seldom the object of his own attention to ask, let alone discover, how he struck other people. He was, moreover, as Mr. Desmond McCarthy has well insisted, essentially a man of action, absorbed in an impersonal search for the answer to practical questions and interested hardly at all in his own relationship to the issues involved or his own psychological approach to them. All this tells against effective self-portraiture, and the reader in quest of this may well feel that



I have loved righteousness &
hated iniquity: therefore I die
in exile.
Gregory VII

The little dogs & all,
Tray, Blanche & Sweetheart,
see they bark at me.
King Lear

And more true joy Marcellus
exiled feels
Than Caesar with a Senate
at his heels
Essay on Man

A JOTTING OF H. H. A.

Memories and Reflections tells him almost everything about the author except what he is really curious to know.

Much of his writing conjures up distinctly his accents and manner as a speaker; and these may be worth recalling to the mind of those from whose memory they have begun to fade, or recording for others who never witnessed them. At the table of the House, his hands holding the box or hanging at his sides, he seemed more firmly planted on the ground than most men. The dominant physical impression was that of a rock-like steadiness, standing foursquare to all the winds of debate. In the Irish crisis of 1913–1914, when every sort of attempt had been made to stampede him, he remarked at a meeting, "I am not going to be hustled"; and the impossibility of hustling him—physically or mentally—was so self-evident that laughter mingled with the cheers which followed. Physically or mentally, for with the massive physical poise went qualities of mind and nerve to match it, a sureness of touch which never seemed to fumble or hesitate or trip. Yet just as a top simulates rest while in rapid motion, this superficial phlegm masked the nimbleness of an intellectual pugilist in the pink of condition, wary, agile and alert; and few of those who in debate interposed what seemed to them at the moment pointed or crushing scores were anxious to repeat the experiment.

His voice was impressively deep and rather stern in timbre; of good range and flexibility, though he never quite cured himself of a habit of dropping it towards the end of a sentence. He had few gestures, and no mannerisms, beyond a habit, when rising to speak, of shrugging his shoulders two or three times, and of patting the left lapel of his coat with the right hand. His Parliamentary manner was generally regarded as a model, and the advice of Lord Ullswater to young members who asked him whom they should study and imitate, was "Watch Asquith."

His strength as a Parliamentarian was manifold. He excelled in unfolding complex matter. It did not seem to matter in what disorder or haste materials were injected into his mind; they emerged from it, after an astonishingly short interval, disciplined, marshalled, each occupying its logical place in an orderly procession. His speech on the Vote of Credit of August 6th, 1914, historic alike in its occasion and its effect upon the House, is the classic statement of the British case against Germany. Yet it was made at a time when telegrams were still flowing in from all over Europe, when the situation was shifting from hour to hour, when the Cabinet was in almost continuous session, and, as appears from one of his letters, on less than five minutes' preparation. Indeed, his less prepared speeches were among his most successful, and it is perhaps unfortunate that as he advanced in life his notes became more copious. This habit may have been encouraged by the necessity while he was Prime Minister of minute verbal preparation in the case of speeches on international affairs such as that annually made at the Lord Mayor's banquet on November 9th. In these pronouncements which were reported all over the world, the wrong word might well cause a European war, and much of what he said was actually written out *in extenso*. On the other hand it was as a rule impossible to tell from reading a speech of his what degree of preparation had gone to it.

During a large part of his career he was generally acknowledged to be the most formidable debater in the House of Commons. He resembled one of those naval guns which can throw a ton of metal for great distances with extraordinary precision, and are said nevertheless to be capable of being moved into position by the hand of a child; for the rapidity of adjustment was no less remarkable than the weight of metal discharged. Always ready, and never much below his best, he was perhaps most effective in reply, especially in winding up a debate. He seldom dissipated his resources in the business of rounding up small points. Brushing aside or giving away the inessential he concentrated his fire on the centre, the apparent strength of the enemy's position. This would be shown to rest on some fundamental assumption which he would proceed to demolish, thereby cutting the ground from beneath the whole structure and bringing it to the ground. Ridicule and irony were among his favourite weapons, and he excelled in lowering the temperature of debate by a douche of cool destructive common-sense. In a debate on his Licensing Bill of 1908 a member of the Opposition Front Bench dwelt with portentous gravity on the danger of reducing the convivial facilities of British hotels. This, it appeared, might even involve international complications. The thirsty foreigner, landing on our shores after drinking hours, and finding his hopes of refreshment dashed, would form a mean conception of British hospitality. The speaker descanted on the glories of hotels untrammelled by pedantic temperance regulations and the risk to the Comity of Nations which would follow if their existing liberties were curtailed. "I think," said Asquith who followed him, "the Right Honourable gentleman has established beyond doubt that hotels are not a public nuisance," and this was felt to dispose of the whole speech. His last speech in the House of Commons[1] was a good example of the art of administering aspirin to a febrile patient. The Liberal Party had moved an amendment to a motion of censure on the Labour Government for its withdrawal of the Campbell prosecution, demanding an inquiry by a Select Committee into the circumstances. This not very extreme proposal had been referred to by Mr. Ramsay MacDonald as "crooked," "mean" and "ungentlemanly," and by some of his friends as involving "torture" and even "crucifixion." "Why," said Asquith, "this sacrosant super-sensitiveness? It is the convenient invention of the Labour Government. I have never known any other set of men who were equally thin-skinned. . . . What is the matter with the Amendment? Surely it is strictly in accordance with precedent." He cited in support of this assertion the Select Committee which had been appointed to investigate the Jameson Raid and the Marconi scandal, and in reference to the Marconi Committee, continued: "It sat for weeks and months, and my Rt. Honourable friends and colleagues who were the object of the charges, what did they do? They did not make funeral orations; they did not threaten a Ministerial crisis; they did not propose to go to the country. They went upstairs to the torture chamber—very brave men, no doubt—but not braver than the average Member of Parliament. With unblinking eyes and unshaken nerves they faced the boot, the thumbscrew and the rack and all the rest of mediæval cruelty." The cooling draught came in this case too late to achieve its purpose, but it came near doing so.

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[1] October 8th, 1924.

But if the habit of reading the speeches of deceased statesmen has any future in this country, it is not on such ephemeral debating efforts, however adroit, that it will fix. Two series of Asquith's speeches alike on their theme, their occasion, and their substance, deserve to be called classical: his speeches on the House of Lords issue, and those delivered on or near the outbreak of the Great War. These are likely to be of enduring interest to students of British politics, of the British Constitution, and of British history. A list of his published writings and speeches will be found in an Appendix to this chapter.

III

Asquith's political fortunes were undoubtedly at a very low ebb at the beginning of 1919 and the omens for the future were far from propitious. The election had left Liberals in the constituencies stunned and divided. The Northcliffe press was demanding that "Asquith should be impeached." The Coalition organs were pouring out day by day a ceaseless stream of innuendo and abuse of him. During the first six months of 1919 not a single invitation to speak on a Liberal platform reached him from any Liberal Association in the country. Between January and September of this year his public appearances were confined to one speech at a dinner in the Connaught Rooms, two or three "non-party" meetings at which he spoke on the League of Nations or on Free Trade. Liberal politics, for the time being, were sternly taboo.

With the autumn the depression began to lift. Liberal spirits showed signs of reviving, and he began to resume his old influence and authority in the Party. From now onwards to the end of the year he made some half-dozen public speeches, criticising the "deplorable flaccidity of the Coalition" and its "everlasting attempts, ending in confusion and contradiction, to make the best of both parties." Ireland and the fiscal question served specially to illustrate this theme, Ireland where the offer of Home Rule had been stultified by coupling it with compulsory military service and coercion; the fiscal question in which the Conservative members of the Coalition had insisted on an anti-Dumping Bill and the Liberal members were pretending that it was a higher form of Free Trade. In demolishing this Bill with its high-protectionist proposal that nothing should be sold in this country more cheaply than it was sold abroad, and the irresponsible Committee that it proposed for the regulation of imports, Asquith was on his native heath, and it was evident that he was enjoying himself. Yet another cause that he delighted to champion in these days was that of the old Civil Service whom it was the custom to disparage for the exaltation of the business men, the men of "push and go," who had flooded the public Departments under the Coalition. "Never," he said, in a speech at Edgware,[1] "was there a more extravagant and less successful experiment in administration than the attempt to supersede our old Civil Service by the importation of all sorts and kinds from what is called the business world." There were certain business men whose services he was ready to acknowledge, but he never wavered in his view that the professional Civil Service, so far from deserving condemnation, had splendidly justified itself during, and after, the War.

Then early in the New Year (1920) the death of Sir John McCullum created a vacancy at Paisley. Sir John—one of the most popular men in Paisley—had only had a majority of 106 at the "Coupon" election, and the divisions in the local Liberal Associations were still, by all accounts, as acute as they had been at the last contest. Ultimately when the decision was taken to invite Asquith, it was

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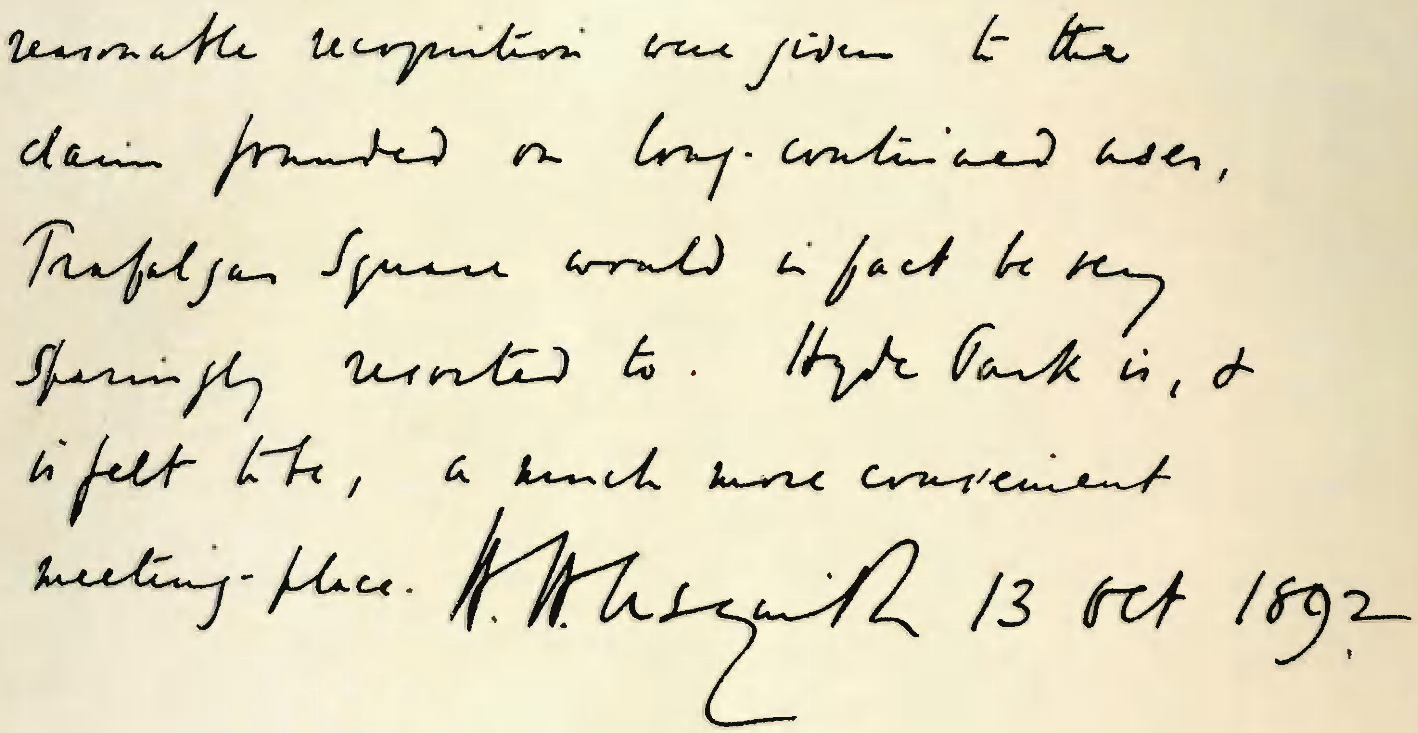
[1] 21st July, 1919.



reasonable recognition were given to the
claim founded on long-continued user,
Trafalgar Square would in fact be very
sparingly resorted to. Hyde Park is, &
is felt to be, a much more convenient
meeting-place. H. H. Asquith 13 Oct 1892

H. H. A.'s SIGNATURE

only by the narrow majority of some 25 votes in a large meeting of the Association. The prospects were, therefore, not too encouraging, but Asquith, once the invitation was offered, had no doubt about it being his duty to accept it. Mr. Vivian Phillipps who was then acting as his Private Secretary supplies some memories of the contest which followed :

" He opened his campaign on January 26th with a ' preliminary talk ' to the members of the Liberal Association in the Paisley Liberal Club. The club hall which will hold some 600 people was packed to the doors, with a gathering of Liberals of all shades of opinion—those who had opposed as well as those who had supported his selection as candidate.

At the end of a short speech of rather less than thirty minutes the meeting had become a solid body of enthusiastic workers, pledged to carry his candidature to victory. From thence onward, for a fortnight, he carried through a campaign of meetings—often as many as five in a single day—which would have taxed the physique of many a much younger man, but from start to finish, he showed no trace of fatigue or staleness. Taking for his main theme a different subject each night he presented to the electors a comprehensive survey of the whole field of domestic and international problems, and expounded his view of what should be the Liberal attitude towards them.

Halls were invariably too small to hold those who wanted to hear him. When he spoke on the Peace Treaty in the Clark Town Hall on February 6th, the great square outside was black with thousands who had been unable to obtain admission. It was in this speech, that, looking forward into the future, he warned the electors of the peril of attempting to annihilate the Central Powers by the exaction of impossible reparations. After pointing out that when prior claims had been satisfied there would be very little left for this country he said : ' This is a bad and doubtful debt and a prudent man of business will not let it enter into the account at all. I would like to add upon that point that I think it would be wise, if those who have the stewardship of our finances and are forecasting their possible future resources, were to take a similar course, if not identical, in regard to the sums which are, on paper, due to us from the various Allies which we have helped to finance during the war. I would rather we forwent receipt of what we lent in pursuit of the great common adventure than that we should do anything to cripple and maim their powers of recuperation and prosperity in the future.'

Prophetic words in the light of present troubles. Nevertheless they were at once fastened on by his Coalition opponent as evidence that he was a ' pro-German ' and within forty-eight hours Paisley was plastered with bills warning the electors that ' Asquith is going to let Germany off cheap.' His characteristic comment on this—in his final speech of the campaign was ' I have not a word to qualify or retract. This is silly as well as scandalous, and as scandalous as it is silly.'

But the real opposition which he had to meet came, not from the Coalition—though their emissaries were active enough in the constituency—but from the Labour Party which confronted him in the person

1919–1922
Age 66–70

> of Mr. J. M. Biggar with a really formidable opponent. Biggar was popular in the borough, well-equipped on the platform, and had come within an ace of victory at the previous election in December 1918. On this occasion his candidature received the blessing of Lord Haldane, and of a group of former Liberal Members of Parliament—including Charles Trevelyan and Arthur Ponsonby—who, having seceded to the Labour Party, issued a manifesto attacking Asquith's record as Prime Minister and urging the electors of Paisley to reject him. Labour threw its full strength into the fight and Ramsay MacDonald and J. H. Thomas were among its 'stars' who appeared on the 'Biggar' platform.
>
> On the other hand large bodies of University students from Glasgow came into Paisley every day to do volunteer canvassing work for Asquith, and individual Liberals coming up from such far distances as the South of England, took up their quarters in Paisley for the final days of the campaign in order to render help.
>
> A significant feature during these closing days was the number of resolutions and messages of sympathy and goodwill which came from Liberal Associations in all parts of the country. In all they amounted to some 300—a large proportion being from Associations which at the moment were represented in the House of Commons by Liberal supporters of the Coalition—an encouraging indication of the state of Liberal opinion in the constituencies. At the closing meeting before the poll Asquith was as fresh and vigorous as he had been at the beginning. His supporters were in high spirits. The canvass returns were more than satisfactory. The signs and portents were for victory.
>
> Polling was on February 12th, and a fortnight had to elapse—to enable the 'absent voters' papers to be received—before the counting of the votes.
>
> The result declared soon after midday on February 26th was:
>
> | | |
> |---|---|
> | Asquith . . | 14,736 |
> | Biggar . . | 11,902 |
> | McKean . . | 3,795 |
>
> Compared with the 'coupon' election of fifteen months previously the total poll had increased from 22,179 to 30,433.
>
> As he drove away from the Municipal Buildings after the figures had been announced, he remarked to those who were with him that they appeared to have failed to notice the most interesting feature of the result. On being asked to explain he observed, 'merely that I am the first Liberal in our election records to cause a Tory to forfeit his deposit.' "

For himself he took special pride in the assistance given him by his elder daughter, Violet Bonham Carter, whose remarkable gifts as a speaker raised Paisley audiences to a high pitch of enthusiasm.

The Paisley campaign was an extraordinary effort which many of the old hands in Scotland thought fit to compare with Mr. Gladstone's Midlothian campaign. Asquith's speeches were as far as possible removed from ordinary electioneering effusions. They mapped out in orderly sequence the whole ground of Liberal effort in domestic and international policy. If it is remembered that they were delivered in January 1920, Asquith's criticism of the Treaty of Versailles, his plea for moderation in the matter of Reparations, his warning against the dangers which he saw lying ahead that the New States would surround themselves with Tariff walls, unless steps were quickly taken to provide Customs Unions, and above all his bold statement—denounced at the time as "insanity"—that Dominion Home Rule would prove to be the only solution of the Irish question, remain striking examples of wisdom and foresight which have been more than justified by events.

When he passed from Cavendish Square to take his seat in the House of Commons on 2nd March the entire route was lined by cheering and enthusiastic crowds, the like of which had scarcely been seen in London since Disraeli returned bringing "Peace with honour" from Berlin. He took it with his accustomed modesty and spoke chaffingly of the new top-hat which the medical students had annexed as a trophy, but it touched him deeply. It was the spontaneous amend for seeming ingratitude and injustice of a generous people who knew in their hearts that he had served them well.

IV

It would be idle to say that Asquith found himself at home in the House of Commons to which he returned, or that he made any serious effort to conciliate it. To the end of his life he continued to say that it was the worst House of Commons he had ever known. Though thronged with men who called themselves Conservatives, its methods and practice offended all his Conservative instincts. Collective responsibility seemed to have vanished, and with it had gone Treasury control and other things which he thought to be the imperatives of good Government. The struggle going on between different sections of the Government was scarcely veiled; moderation and severity, coercion and conciliation, Free Trade and Protection were practised alternately or simultaneously by the same Ministers, as if they were the same things, or it were a mere chance which came uppermost. The Head of the Government was seldom in the House of Commons, and in his absence, it was difficult to ascertain whether Ministers who answered questions spoke for the Government or could commit it to anything. Asquith had often in his career faced a hostile House of Commons, and he had never quailed before scenes or storms, but in the old days he had felt himself to be on common Parliamentary ground with even the angriest opponent, whereas the new House seemed completely to have broken with the traditions that he valued. It was, nevertheless, a real pleasure to him to be in intimate association with the Liberal remnant and especially with Sir Donald Maclean who from this time onwards became one of his closest and warmest friends.

Having explained his general views in the Paisley speeches, he resolved for the present to concentrate on Ireland, and on this his intervention was bold and powerful. When he declared for Dominion Home Rule at Paisley,[1] not a few even of the faithful shook their heads and begged him to be careful, but on this matter he was determined to act on his own judgment. In a passage in his *Memories and Reflections* he has described the course of events which convinced him that all other solutions were impossible:

> "Under the provisions of the Parliament Act the third Home Rule Bill, though its operation was suspended, was in 1914 placed on the Statute Book, with the promise of an Amending Bill, to meet all the fair scruples and objections of the Ulster Minority. The abortive Sinn Fein rising at Easter 1916, was followed by a sincere but unsuccessful effort on my part and that of my colleagues in the Government to arrive at a settlement of the Ulster difficulty. Then followed the assembly of a National Irish Convention which sat for some months at the end of 1917 and the beginning of 1918. Owing to the conciliatory and statesmanlike attitude of Mr. Redmond on the one side, and of Unionist leaders like Lord Midleton on the other, the Convention had advanced (as appears from its Report in the spring of 1918) though not the whole distance, yet a long way on the road to agreement.
>
> The Coalition Government, which then still contained a number of Labours members, chose this singularly inopportune moment to introduce a Military Service Bill, which could be extended to Ireland—a step which I and my Unionist colleagues in the first Coalition Government had deliberately and unanimously refused to take. They promised to introduce without delay a Self-Government Bill, and to do their best to carry it through simultaneously with the application of Compulsory Service. The whole of 1918 was allowed to pass; the whole of 1919 was allowed to pass, until we came to December. For twenty months after Compulsory Service had been upon the Statute Book (although never put in operation) the promise remained unfulfilled. The result was that Sinn Fein, which was on the down grade, which was losing election after election, raised its head, and a disappointed and, as they said, a befooled Irish people deserted the Constitutional party at the general election of December 1918, and rallied round the flag of the Revolutionary party.
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> There was all the difference in the world between the atmosphere of Ireland in 1918 and its atmosphere when the Government tried to redeem their promise. The opinion and the sympathy of law-abiding people, as I pointed out at Paisley, was not now with those who were trying to

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[1] Paisley, 2nd February.

H. H. A. IN THE GARDEN OF THE WHARF WITH LUKE ASQUITH, ONE OF HIS GRANDCHILDREN

carry out and execute the law, but was very largely, tacitly at any rate, with those who violated it. 1919–1922 Age 66–70

Nevertheless, I urged that we must persevere without delay in that which was the only effectual means of getting at the root of all this trouble, in completing and setting on its legs a generous system of Irish self-government.

The session of 1920—my first as member for Paisley—was largely taken up by a Government Bill, which, as I said at the time, was passed for the purpose of giving to a section of Ulster a Parliament which it did not want, and to the remaining three-quarters of Ireland a Parliament which it would not have. I put forward as the alternative my Paisley plan of full Dominion Self-Government, repeating my adherence in regard to Ulster to the principle of county option. The Prime Minister scoffed and declared that my plan was one which no party or section of a party in Ireland countenanced, and that the Government scheme 'held the field'; a hackneyed but dangerous metaphor."

Though the Prime Minister scoffed, and Unionists said it was downright treason, the events of the next few months more than ever confirmed him in his opinion. He looked with horror on the competition in crime between Sinn Feiners and the "Black and Tans" which was now set up in Ireland, and could not contain his indignation at the equivocations and evasions with which the Government sought to cloak their own connivance. Whatever might be the guilt of the Sinn Feiners, reprisals by the forces of the Crown, confounding innocent with guilty, casting out Satan with Beelzebub, as the Archbishop of Canterbury said, seemed to him to strike an irreparable blow at law and justice and to inflict a deep stain on the national honour.

At the beginning of October 1920 he addressed a long letter to *The Times* challenging the Government and developing the argument for Dominion Home Rule:

Oct. 4.

SIR,

In the early weeks of this year, when I was candidate for Paisley, I expressed the opinion that, at the stage which we had then reached, there was no practicable solution of the Irish problem which fell short of Dominion Home Rule.

The experience of the last nine months—perhaps the most deplorable and scandalous chapter even in the annals of Irish Government—has accentuated with tragic emphasis the urgency of the situation.

What have been the measures taken by the Executive of the Crown? On the legislative side they have put forward a paltering compromise, which is repudiated by every section of Irish opinion, though it may for the moment be favoured with the contemptuous and cynical patronage of Sir Edward Carson, who thinks he sees in what is proposed the prospect of an insurmountable block to the attainment of Irish unity. On the administrative side we have seen the supersession of the organised machinery of law and justice by a superior power, which derives its authority not so much from sporadic terrorism as from the support, through all the degrees of enthusiastic co-operation, of passive connivance, and of sympathetic acquiescence, of the great bulk of the Irish people. The King's Executive is at once impotent and aggressive, and its policy, or want of policy, has reached a fitting climax in the unexampled campaign, for which the Government must bear the responsibility, of military and police reprisals. . . .

There are, as it seems to me, two conditions which govern and limit any conceivable solution.

The first is that the Irish people should be made to believe that, so far as Great Britain is concerned, what is offered comes from an honest, and also from a responsible source. The second is that, after making all necessary allowance for the provisional abstention, not of an artificial, but of a genuine local minority, it should meet and satisfy Irish aspirations.

Nothing, I am certain, can now fulfil the second of these conditions but the bestowal upon Ireland of the status of an autonomous Dominion in the fullest and widest sense.

What does that mean ?

None of our Dominions claim the right to a separate Foreign Policy of its own. On the other hand, they all show an increasing and perfectly legitimate desire for fuller confidence and freer consultation in the whole domain of our external relations, and in particular, for a voice in the making and revision of treaties. The Dominion of Ireland should in these matters be on a level footing with the rest.

In regard to naval and military forces, I do not share the apprehensions of those who think it necessary to impose on an Irish Dominion limitations and fetters which are not to be found elsewhere in our self-governing Empire. No Irish Government would be so insane as to mortgage its scanty margin of resources for such a fruitless and costly enterprise as the creation of an Irish Navy. Nor is it readily conceivable that it would seek to deny—what it could never effectively prevent—the free access to Irish ports and harbours of the vessels of the Imperial Navy. Further, no grant of autonomy could be regarded as complete which did not include the right to raise and maintain, for the purpose of local defence, an adequate military force.

Fiscal independence is a necessary incident of Dominion status. I cannot think that it is worth while, in view of the colossal figures of our national finance, to haggle over the " nicely calculated less or more " of Irish indebtedness.

To those who are disposed to think such a policy humiliating in what it surrenders, and hazardous in its possibilities of future danger, I would put this question—What is your alternative ?

Can anything be more humiliating or more pregnant with incalculable peril, than the spectacle which has now been unfolding itself for months, before our eyes and those of the world, a spectacle in which tragedy and farce are inextricably intermixed ? Its only logical sequence is to take seriously in hand the task of reconquering Ireland, and holding her by

> force—a task which, though not perhaps beyond the powers, will never be sanctioned by the will or the conscience of the British people.
>
> I am not alarmed by the spectre of an Irish Republic. Men do not in the long run fight for phrases, but for realities. (*The Times*, Oct. 4.)

A week later in a speech at Carnarvon (9th October) Mr. Lloyd George went all lengths in support of his policy of "thorough" in Ireland. He defended reprisals as the necessary way of dealing with the Irish murders, denounced Dominion Home Rule as "lunacy," and jeered at Asquith for having addressed a letter on that subject to *The Times*, thus giving "a bone to the dog that bit him in the leg," and (according to his account) "chased him out of Downing Street." What must have been the mortification of the *Daily News*, "the faithful watch-dog that barked and snapped and worked itself into a state of hydrophobia, whenever anyone looked cross at Mr. Asquith"? Mr. Lloyd George painted a lurid picture of Ireland under Dominion Home Rule. He saw it with a fleet of submarines, sowing the seas with mines and providing bases for a hostile fleet. "We are not," he said, "going to quail before a combination of a handful of assassins."

Gladstone can seldom have been angrier with any speech of Disraeli's during the Bulgarian atrocities than Asquith was with this speech, which he regarded as the most signal betrayal of Liberal principles yet on record against a Liberal Coalitionist. He replied a few days later in a speech at Ayr:

> "We must face the facts. The administration in Ireland has become impotent to secure the first conditions of any civilised society. The task in which it is engaged is not the task of Government, but of war, and civil war—war in its worst and most hideous guise. The presence of these facts of unexampled gravity are an indescribable humiliation. On the tone and taste of the Prime Minister's latest speech I don't think it worth while to dwell, but all its flippancies and vulgarities have not diverted, and cannot divert attention from the outstanding fact that it is a naked confession of political bankruptcy.
>
> Mr. Lloyd George says that you cannot have a one-sided war. Each side must have the right to hit back. Who had ever suggested that the soldiers or police should stand to be shot at and not fire back? They all agreed that under the conditions to which Ireland had now been reduced they were entitled and bound to employ all their powers of self-defence. No one knows better than Mr. Lloyd George that such a representation of the case against the Government is a gross and gratuitous travesty of the facts. I am confident that Parliament will insist on an independent and impartial inquiry.
>
> The vast majority of the cases are in no sense acts of self-defence; they are acts of blind and indiscriminate vengeance. In not a few instances

these so-called reprisals were deliberately aimed at the destruction of local industries. The Government proposes to continue the civil war on the absolutely false assumption that the problem is simply to put down a handful of assassins. To me, and I believe, to the overwhelming majority of my fellow-Liberals, the policy of the Government can only be fitly described as a policy of despair." (October 14, 1920.)

"Now that Ll. G. calls me a lunatic and Carson calls me a traitor, I begin to feel sure that I am on the right lines," was his reflection on the day after his speech.

He repeated his protest against the "Black and Tan" methods in a vote of censure in the House of Commons on 24th November and in this he had the full support of Independent Liberals and Labour. But on Dominion Home Rule he was still almost a solitary voice, and once more he was warned of the strategical and other dangers of the line he was taking. "Life is very difficult just now," he wrote on 20th October, "we are under a Government of reckless gamblers, and we drift on from one folly and wickedness to another. All warnings and protests are just as unheeded as Cassandra's; and it would seem that people have been so perverted and brutalised by the war that they have lost all power of response to any appeal to their better and older instincts. And if one tries to strike a bold, true note half one's friends shiver and cower and implore one not to 'get in front of the band,' in other words, to renounce both the duties and risks of leadership."

All through these months he was greatly depressed by his own failure and that of the little band of Independent Liberals to influence the House of Commons or stay the course of events. Remonstrances were useless; Ireland was given over to murder and counter-murder; the Prime Minister assured the House of Commons and the country that he was succeeding; and spoke jeeringly to a Conservative meeting at the Constitutional Club about "Bolshevists and Sinn Feiners and faddists and cranks of all sorts" who had joined a meeting of protest at the Albert Hall.

But what protest and remonstrance had failed to do was now to be done by the force of events. Before the summer of 1921 it had become clear that the Government must either put an end to the policy of reprisals and seek peace by negotiation, or provide a great military force—the soldiers said 100,000 men—for the systematic subdual of the country. The Prime Minister, Mr. Churchill has told us,[1] was still "markedly disposed to fight it out at all costs," but his colleagues apparently were not. Even the Conservatives had grown restive at the course of events, and the discredit it was bringing on the Government not only at home but in foreign countries, and especially the United States. In July the negotiations began which ended in the Treaty of December 1921, setting up the Irish Free State and granting it the Dominion status for which Asquith had incessantly pleaded during the previous two years. There was a further period of exasperated internal strife in Ireland, but in the end the Free State was established on this basis.

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[1] *The World Crisis*, V, p. 290.

The Coalition rapidly disintegrated from this time onwards. The India Office seemed to be at war with the Foreign Office, and the Foreign Office with the Prime Minister and his Secretariat whom it accused of usurping its functions and acting without its knowledge. Mr. Montagu, Secretary for India, who had forfeited his place by publishing a despatch from the Government of India without consulting his colleagues, retorted fiercely on the Prime Minister who charged him with having ignored Cabinet responsibility. "Cabinet responsibility," he said, "was a joke." Having connived at its "complete disappearance," the Prime Minister "now brought it out at a convenient moment and made him the victim."[1] Where the responsibility resided, if it existed, was more and more in these days a puzzle even to those who professed to know the mind of the Government. If the records which have since come to light may be trusted, there can seldom have been greater confusion in public affairs than in the period between the Genoa Conference in March 1922, and the fall of the Government in October of that year. The Prime Minister had one Russian policy, and most of his colleagues an entirely different one; the Prime Minister was encouraging the Greeks who were at war with Turkey, the Foreign Secretary thought peace and a quick settlement with the Turks to be imperative; one section of the Government were for an appeal to the country, another was sure that such an appeal would be disastrous. Lord Birkenhead was heard rebuking the Chief of the Conservative organisation (Lord Younger) as the "Cabin-boy" who had mounted the bridge and seized the wheel in a storm. The scene from within may be reconstructed with the aid of Lord Ronaldshay's *Life of Lord Curzon* and Mr. Churchill's *World Crisis*. The crash came finally when, forgetful of Cabinet responsibility, the Prime Minister and Mr. Churchill seemed to be rushing ahead into an unnecessary and unwanted war. Then the Conservative Party struck, and the whole structure came toppling down.

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[1] Cambridge, 11th March.

APPENDIX TO CHAPTER LVI

Asquith's published writings, addresses and speeches include the following:

An Election Guide. Notes for the conduct of Elections in England and Wales. National Press Agency, 1885.
Occasional Addresses 1893–1916. Macmillan, London, 1918.
Trade and Empire. Mr. Chamberlain's proposals examined in four speeches. Methuen & Co., London, 1903.
The War, its Causes and its Message. Speeches delivered August–October, 1914. Methuen & Co., London, 1914.
The Paisley Policy. Speeches delivered at the Paisley by-election, 1920. Cassell & Co., London, 1920.
The Genesis of the War. Cassell & Co., London, 1923.
Studies and Sketches. Hutchinson & Co., London, 1924.
Scaliger. Cassell & Co., London, 1926.
Fifty Years of Parliament. 2 Vols. Cassell & Co., London, 1926.
Memories and Reflections, 1852–1927. 2 Vols. Cassell & Co., London, 1928.
Speeches by the Earl of Oxford and Asquith. (Selected and edited by Mr. Basil Herbert under Lord Oxford's " general supervision.") Hutchinson & Co., London, 1927.

The present article on the Cabinet in the *Encyclopædia Britannica* is from his pen.

CHAPTER LVII

LIBERAL REUNION

Independent Liberals and the Coalition Liberals—A confused election—Decline of the Paisley majority—Asquith and the Centre Party—A sudden change—Protection and Free Trade the issue—Reunion of Liberals—Dissolution of Parliament and defeat of the Government—Conservative overtures—Decision to support Labour—The Labour Government—Its downfall—Asquith's effort to save it. J. A. S.

1922–1924
Age 70–72

In the last months of the Coalition, the Opposition had had little to do but look on. If their object was to bring about the fall of the Government, that work was being done for them by the Government itself. But its accomplishments left very perplexing problems for Asquith and the Independent Liberals. Mr. Bonar Law, who had retired on the ground of ill-health in the previous year, had come back as Prime Minister and his party had made a clean-cut with Mr. Lloyd George, leaving him and his group of National Liberals in an isolation far from splendid, and all the world was asking where they would go next. Undoubtedly some of them looked for salvation to their old party, but a sudden turnabout after the estrangements of the past four years would have perplexed and perhaps shocked the public, and there were no signs that Mr. Lloyd George himself was disposed to it. Not the least of the difficulties was that on the issue—the threatened war with Turkey—on which his Conservative supporters had finally broken with him, the sympathies of Independent Liberals were generally with them and not with him.

The new Prime Minister went quickly to an election, and once more the Liberal Party was caught in confusion. Whether "National Liberals" should be opposed by Independent Liberals was a question which in general was left to the local Associations, who answered it in the affirmative in a large number of constituencies. The natural line of an Opposition at this election would have been to challenge the Coalition on its record, but the Coalition had vanished and the Conservatives now in power protested that they had deliberately broken with it, and could not be held responsible for its proceedings.

A Liberal attack on the Coalition was in effect an attack on Mr. Lloyd George, and that was scarcely conducive to Liberal unity. Apart from all else, the mere fact that two parties both calling themselves Liberal, were now presenting themselves to the electors, an immense number of whom knew little of the recent history of parties or their pre-war records, was a fruitful source of confusion.

In the days before the polling Mr. Lloyd George spent a large part of his time defending the Coalition and protesting his readiness to act with "men of moderate opinion" in any party. He saw a "hurricane" coming, and appealed to all and sundry "not to endanger this glorious old ship by quarrels as to what officers shall be on the bridge or what manner or what colour of uniform they shall wear." Asquith quite frankly assailed the Coalition and derided Mr. Lloyd George's language about the splendour and brilliance of its record. In a speech at Peterborough on 27th October, he went over the whole ground, home and foreign, directing his attack now at Mr. Lloyd George and now at Mr. Bonar Law, the latter of whom he absolutely refused to hold guiltless on the ground of his short period of retirement from the Coalition. Asquith seldom made better or more pungent platform speeches than at this election, but as a candidate for power, his strategical position was hopeless from the beginning. Starting with their exiguous numbers, and beset on one side by a hostile Labour Party, and on the other by semi-hostile Coalition Liberals, the Independents could not plausibly present themselves to the country as an alternative Government; and the Conservative Party, having drawn all possible profit from the Coalition, had very adroitly put themselves in a position to capture the reaction from it.

The result was only what might have been expected, but it was a special disappointment, when the polling was over, that Liberals had failed to recover their place as second party in the State. The Conservatives came back 347 strong, Labour 142, Liberals "of all shades and labels" 117,[1] and Mr. Bonar Law had the comfortable majority of 79 over all parties. "I went to the counting at Paisley" (15th November), Asquith wrote a few days later, "and to my surprise and that of my friends the poll was very close, and it was only in the last quarter of an hour that we forged ahead and proceeded to win. I polled more votes than three years ago, and the fall in the majority was entirely caused by the enormous addition to the Labour vote; due to the 5000 unemployed in Paisley, of whom there were practically none in 1920." The same cause was

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[1] Independent Liberals, 64; National Liberals, 53.

MARGOT ASQUITH AND H. H. A. AT PAISLEY

1922–1924 Age 70–72 "tranquillity," and when Parliament rose in the summer the general expectation was that the Government would last out its full normal term.

A few weeks later the whole situation suddenly changed. On 22nd October Mr. Baldwin made a speech at Plymouth in which he declared his opinion that Protection of the Home market was the only remedy for unemployment. It soon appeared that, whether intentionally or not, he had killed his Government. Mr. Bonar Law had given a pledge at the previous election that except for limited experiments in "safeguarding," there would be no Protection in the coming Parliament, and it was inconceivable that with unemployment mounting up, a Government which had declared that there was no other remedy should sit through its normal term and do nothing. Mr. Baldwin faced the inevitable without flinching, and when the House of Commons met on 13th November, he told it that it would be dissolved in three days' time, since he "could not attempt to steer the country through the winter of 1924 without an instrument which was not permissible under the Bonar Law pledge."

This threw upon the Liberal leaders the onus of an immediate decision, and Asquith never doubted that if Mr. Lloyd George and his group were ready to join forces on an unequivocal Free Trade platform, the hatchet must be buried and reunion effected for the sake of Free Trade. Mr. Lloyd George was willing, and put his name below Asquith's to a joint manifesto rallying the country to Free Trade. Some of the faithful thought that the first name would have sufficed, but it was Asquith's view that if the thing was to be done at all, it should be done generously, and he thought it due to Mr. Lloyd George that there should be this acknowledgment of his special position.

III

This reunion of the Liberal forces undoubtedly saved Free Trade at the 1923 election. Asquith threw himself into the fray with his old vehemence, and rapidly took the lead in the debate which rang through the country during the next three weeks. It was his subject, and he held it to be of more importance than any other issue in domestic politics. The result rewarded him, so far as the cause was concerned, but once more, it left a situation of great perplexity to the Liberal leader. For though the Conservatives were reduced from 347 to 255, no other party had a majority of the House, and Labour with its 191 seats was still in advance of Liberals with their 158. Obviously Labour was entitled to the first call, if the Government went out.

Three courses were possible. Asquith might (1) support Mr. Baldwin in continuing in office, (2) support Mr. Ramsay MacDonald in taking office, or (3) take office himself, relying on Conservative support. The last was by no means out of the question if he had been willing. He wrote on 28th December:

> "You would be amused if you saw the contents of my daily post-bag: appeals, threats, prayers from all parts, and from all sorts and conditions of men, women, and lunatics, to step in and save the country from the horrors of Socialism and Confiscation. If I were to agree at this moment to enter into a compact with the Tories, I have little doubt that I could count on a majority in the House of Commons of more than two to one.
>
> As you may imagine, having seen so much as we have in these latter days of the poisonous effects of Coalitions, I am not at all tempted.
>
> But one cannot help contrasting the situation with that, only exactly five years ago, in December 1918, when I and all the faithful lost our seats, and were supposed to be sentenced to damnation for the rest of our political lives.
>
> The City is suffering from an acute attack of nerves at the prospect of a Labour Government. One of the leading bankers came to see me this morning with a message from the City Conservatives, that if only I could set up an Asquith-Grey Government, all the solid people in the country would support it through thick and thin. Isn't it an amusing whirligig?"

So far from being tempted by these suggestions, he never had the slightest doubt that Labour ought to be given its chance. His reasons were first of all that it would be seriously harmful to the national interest and an incitement to class antagonism for the two "middle-class" parties to combine together to deprive Labour of an opportunity which either of them would have claimed as its right, in like circumstances; next, that it was impossible for Mr. Baldwin after he had declared that he could not carry on without Protection to continue in office as if nothing had happened, when he had been refused permission to try that remedy; and finally that he himself was in no circumstances prepared either to enter into a Coalition with the Conservatives or to take office depending on their support. A Labour Government was, in his view, sooner or later inevitable, and the experiment could scarcely be made with less risk to the country than in the conditions created by the election of 1923.

Holding these views he communicated them to a meeting of the Liberal members of the new House on 18th December. It was, he began by saying, a novel experience for him, after being for seven years the favourite target for Tory and Coalition vituperation, that he should be suddenly acclaimed in the same quarters as a potential Saviour of Society:

> I was never unduly perturbed by their abuse; nor am I unduly elated by the almost penitential exuberance of their belated appreciation.
>
> What had been the main plank of the Tory platform at the election? Protection. What was the main plank of the Labour platform? The Capital Levy, with its Socialist adjuncts and accessories. Both have been rejected with overwhelming emphasis by the will of the country. If either of them was submitted to a free vote of the new House of Commons, it would be defeated by a majority of more than 200.
>
> There have been no overtures of any kind from or to the leaders of the two other parties. As far as we are concerned, they are free; as far as they are concerned, we are free. That freedom I intend to preserve uncompromised and unfettered.
>
> The days of the present Government are of course numbered. It seems to be generally assumed that as the second largest party in the House of Commons, the Labour Party will be allowed to assume the responsibility of Government. Well, this may reassure some trembling minds outside: If a Labour Government is ever to be tried in this country, as it will be sooner or later, it could hardly be tried under safer conditions.
>
> We are not going to become a wing or adjunct of any other party. As the first conditions of our usefulness, we shall, I hope, cherish our unfettered freedom and our unconditional independence.

To the end of his life he maintained that in enabling Labour to form a Government the Liberal Party took the right and constitutional course in 1924. But he was nevertheless well aware that it was full of peril from the party point of view, unless smooth and cordial relations were established between Liberals and the Government in the new Parliament. This, unfortunately, proved much more difficult than was expected. Ardent Socialists and Trade-Unionists who thought a new era would dawn when Labour came into power were unable to understand the limitations of minority Government, and looked with suspicion on all fraternising between the Government and its Liberal supporters. The latter, cut off from co-operation and consultation in the framing of policy, more and more felt the reproach of being "hewers of wood and drawers of water" for a régime in which they had no voice. Mr. Ramsay MacDonald's handling of foreign affairs—especially his dealing with the Reparations question and his success in winding up the occupation of the Ruhr—left no ground for complaint and was warmly supported by Liberals, but in most other matters there was friction all the way. The "Hornet's nest of Poplar," as Asquith called it, nearly produced a crisis in February, and for lack of touch between the two parties the life of the Government seemed always in danger.

This was not because the Government was "too advanced" for its Liberal supporters—many of these, on the contrary, held the view that it showed too little enterprise—but because comradeship and confidence were lacking.

Asquith did his utmost to keep the irritation of his party within bounds, and was always in favour of giving the Government time. But in the end he found himself powerless against the growing resentment of the House of Commons at the appearance which Ministers presented of being at the mercy of an outside and irresponsible body correcting and revising their decisions. The climax came with the Government's handling of the proposed Russian treaty, and the Campbell prosecution. In June the Prime Minister told the House of Commons that on no account would this country guarantee a loan to the Soviet Union, and at the beginning of August he announced that the negotiations with Russia had broken down on the question of compensation to owners of nationalised property. A day later, after the intervention of a group of Labour members, he informed the House that a treaty had been drafted which, on the fulfilment of certain conditions, would propose a guaranteed loan. On 5th August proceedings were taken in Court against a Communist named Campbell for incitement to mutiny; a week later they were suddenly withdrawn in circumstances which suggested that the same pressure had been applied. Asquith was never more effective in debate than in these days, but he struggled in vain against this sea of trouble. A highly disciplined unified party might have been persuaded by its whips to give loyal support to a Government declaring black to be white or white black in different weeks or on different days of the same week, but a party professing to be independent could not so act without making itself a laughing stock. Rightly or wrongly, the House of Commons concluded that the Government was being controlled by unknown forces behind the scenes, and its sense that its prerogatives were being invaded by this extraneous body contributed as much as its objection to the action of Ministers in the particular cases to the revolt which ended in the defeat of the Government and the dissolution of the Parliament.

To the end Asquith did his utmost to stay the course of events. After other members of the party had declared their uncompromising hostility to the Russian Treaty and loan he wrote a "letter to a correspondent" which held the door open to modifications. He even threw a life-buoy to the Government by proposing a Select Committee on the Campbell case, but by this time Ministers had passed the point when they either could or would accept help, and he was obliged to say that on the ground on which they took their stand their plight was hopeless. The finale left him both angry and contemptuous. "The Labour Government," he writes in his *Memories and Reflections*, "came to an end in two squalid crises, each of which could have been avoided, or at least circumvented, if they had played their cards with a modicum of either luck or skill."

Mr. Vivian Phillipps, who was Chief Whip of the Liberal Parliamentary party in the 1923–4 Parliament and remained until Asquith's death his Private Secretary and one of his most intimate and trusted friends, supplies a note about his last days in the House of Commons:

> The last two Parliaments in which Asquith sat as a member of the House of Commons were, for him, a welcome change from the Coalition Parliament to which he had returned after his by-election at Paisley. This was particularly so in the 1923 Parliament. The Independent Liberals under his leadership numbered, it is true, some sixty only, but this was more than double their representation in the previous Parliament, and in quality and debating power, they were as formidable a team as any in the House. On the front bench Asquith had with him Sir John Simon, Wedgwood Benn, Godfrey Collins, Charles Roberts, and George Lambert, while behind him an unusual array of Parliamentary talent included men like William Pringle, Isaac Foot, Hope Simpson, William Jowitt, James Falconer, and Percy Harris. Few parties in the House can ever have worked together with a more unselfish team spirit, or in an atmosphere of happier personal relations. As an illustration of this I remember very well conveying to Asquith on the eve of the summer recess a suggestion from our back-benchers that he should consent to be their guest at a private dinner in the House before we separated for the summer holidays, to which he replied, "Why should we not dispense with all formalities and dine together as a family party." Many will remember that gay and amusing evening. In the Parliament of 1924—with 158 Liberal members after Liberal reunion—Asquith's personal contact with the Parliamentary party was necessarily not quite so intimate, and the task of maintaining working relations with the Labour Government was one which led from time to time—as it was bound to do—to differing views among his followers. At such moments it was the instinctive trust in his leadership which ultimately resolved all difficulties and practically only those of us who were close to him in the work of the party could know how deeply he valued the comradeship which showed itself in this loyal acceptance of his judgment and guidance.

CHAPTER LVIII

FROM COMMONS TO LORDS

A disastrous election—Asquith's defeat at Paisley—The King's offer of a Peerage—A visit to the East—Acceptance of Peerage—Defeat for the Oxford Chancellorship—Appointment as K.G.—First impressions of the House of Lords.

J. A. S.

ASQUITH by no means shared the view held by some of his colleagues that Liberals had done a good stroke of business for themselves in bringing the Government down. If in the end he agreed that they could do nothing else, he nevertheless thought it highly probable that Conservatives and not Liberals would reap the benefit of any reaction there might be from Labour; and he saw little possibility of extracting any clear issue for Liberalism from the confusion of the last days in Parliament. For these reasons he looked at the coming election with misgiving, but neither he nor anyone else could have foreseen the extraordinary incident of the Zinovieff letter which let loose a storm upon the country and overwhelmed both Labour and Liberal in an outburst of patriotic wrath and fear. The Liberals were, as usual on these occasions, the worst sufferers, for men and women who are in a state of alarm about Bolshevism do not stop at the Liberal half-way house, but rush headlong to the Conservative shelter. 1924–1925 Age 72

The result was disaster all along the line for Labour and Liberals, but especially for Liberals. The Liberal Party which had painfully brought itself up to 158 at the previous election, was now reduced to a bare forty, and Asquith himself went down in the stampede. The two previous elections had given a warning that his seat at Paisley was precarious. In 1922 the majority had fallen to 300, and though it had risen to 746 in 1923, that was mainly due to the division of the Labour vote between two candidates who between them polled a considerable majority of the aggregate vote. In 1924 Labour closed its ranks and rallied to the attack on Asquith. It was this time a straight fight, and the local reports were reassuring, but the seat was in reality a precarious one for a veteran leader who had

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little time to spare for the young man's job of nursing a constituency, and who, in the circumstances of these times, had become a special target for Labour. The course of the election and the final scene are vividly described by his daughter, Violet (Lady Violet Bonham Carter) in a Diary that she kept at the time :

"It was the fourth Election we had fought at Paisley in a little over three years, and it seemed to me, all the way through, to be far the hardest. The Campbell Case and the Russian Treaty were short commons on which to feed a hungry electorate for three weeks, and Father and I used to fling ourselves on the papers every morning in the wild hope of finding some utterance, by friend or foe, which might form a peg on which to hang one of the many speeches that had got to be delivered before nightfall.

On paper our chances had never been better. Our Tory opponent had withdrawn and was running next door in West Renfrewshire, so we had for the first time in our history a chance of Conservative support—and for the first time we managed to prevent ourselves from insulting our possible Tory adherents. Our machine, always a good one, was functioning, as we were, for the fourth time in three years, and had therefore attained an almost Prussian perfection. MacNair (our trusted agent and devoted friend) reported that on a canvass of two-thirds of the Electorate (27,000), giving every doubtful vote to Labour, we had a majority of between three and four thousand. I was feeling very ill (having just been ordered to bed with a 'murmur' in my heart), and this certainly was very comforting, for I felt it did not so vitally matter whether *I* did well or badly.

Two new factors struck me at the very outset of the contest. The first was that the jungle tactics of Glasgow had spread to Paisley. We had always been accustomed to a fair amount of 'liveliness,' and often fierce Labour opposition and interruption at our meetings, but now for the first time cold-blooded, organised obstruction and rowdyism, drilled yells and catcalls and the howling of uninspired and unspontaneous insults made their appearance in Paisley. My Father dealt with these disturbances quite admirably—sitting massive and unmoved as the Bass Rock, while the clamour burst around him like so much spray—unshaken, unfretted even by this 'sound and fury signifying nothing,' his thoughts having apparently taken refuge far away in some Ivory Tower of their own. His patience was as impersonal as if he had been waiting for a shower of rain to pass. When a musical offensive began he might ask me with a sudden detached curiosity : 'What is this melancholy dirge they are crooning now ?' On my telling him that it was the Red Flag he would evince mild interest, then lean back in his chair again with a sniff and a shrug and resume his own train of thought. When they had sung and shouted themselves hoarse he would rise and deliver with perfect calm the speech he had come there to make, quite untinged by any shade of indignation at the events which had delayed it. I have never known him fail to get a hearing, nor can I imagine a more thankless and unsatisfactory subject for the sport of 'shouting-down.'

The other new, and discouraging, feature of the contest which I became almost immediately aware of was that in this Election argument and appeal were going to play no part whatever. Our opponents' losing cards were not going to lose tricks, nor were our aces going to win them. We could rely on every Liberal vote in Paisley (and perhaps a little tepid Tory support based mostly on fear), but a new generation of young men who had ripened into voters, almost it seemed, since the last Election, were determined to give a solid class-vote to Labour, no matter what we (or their own leaders either for that matter) said or did. We were not attacking a mental attitude, which might be shaken by its impact with words or thoughts, but an enregimented class-army against which ideas and reasoning were quite powerless.

We had our usual routine of meetings, big ones in the Clark Town Hall and Central Hall, and innumerable small ones in schoolrooms, all packed to overflowing, and attended night after night by our Liberal supporters, who treated us, as always, as though we had been the true Kirk and the Russian Ballet rolled into one. As always the women's support, even in the bitterest Labour wards, was unwavering. Our last two eve of the Poll meetings, at which Buckmaster spoke, went off magnificently.

On Polling Day Father and I spent an arctic ten hours touring the Polling Booths in icy rain, our devoted workers standing on the pavements from morning to night with touching enthusiasm and endurance. We met and spoke to Rosslyn Mitchell, our very " preux " opponent, an ex-Liberal Glasgow solicitor—a dapper and almost foppish figure with white spats and elaborate ties and a theatrical wave in his hair—but real eloquence, and a good deal of cleverness and well-concealed moderation behind his tactical sob-stuff.

The evening we spent as usual on Polling Night with our kind supporters the Eadies, listening on the wireless to the very depressing results coming in from the country—all Manchester gone Tory—in fact the beginning of a stupendous Tory landslide. I wished I had not heard them, thinking how difficult it would be to muster the high spirits we *must* be in when we celebrated our own victory at the Liberal Club that night. About midnight Margot and I went down to the Town Hall, where the count was taking place, and sat waiting in a little room downstairs. Father was as usual upstairs watching the counting. A kind official who always ministered to us on these occasions peeped in, murmured " neck and neck "—and disappeared, we hoped, to bring us more news—but he never reappeared again. Basil Herbert (who was acting as Father's secretary) went out several times into the hall which was filled with Pressmen, but could glean nothing. I felt the " needle " one always has at this moment, badly—but discounted it as a purely physical symptom. No one had a doubt as to the result. The only thing that had given me the slightest misgiving was the news (hailed as good by MacNair) that during the last two hours the polling had been exceptionally heavy—almost 90 per cent coming out in some wards. I felt that these *must* be Labour votes.

At last, after endless waiting with Pressmen at the bottom of the stairs I heard the doors being unlocked and flung open. There was the usual wild scamper up. I looked in vain for our friends—rushing to meet us half-way and grind our knuckles to powder. No one came. Even the official in gold buttons outside the door would not answer when I said 'what's the result ?'

Then I saw John Gladstone's white face, and the icy fear at my heart was confirmed. We were beaten. Father was standing at the table facing the Sheriff. I moved quickly to his side and took his arm, and on my other side I felt Basil gripping mine in a vice of pain and sympathy. Father was absolutely controlled. He just said to me 'I'm out by 2,000,' then seconded a vote of thanks to the Returning Officer. Rosslyn Mitchell, with whom I shook hands as I congratulated him, was in tears and said to me 'I'm so sorry, so terribly sorry this has happened.' Outside I heard the tigerish howl of the crowd as the figures were announced.

The awful ordeal of the Liberal Club was before us. I shall never forget it. We found it, as ever, packed with our supporters who had sat there for hours agog with expectancy, confidently expecting a great victory, waiting to shout themselves hoarse with joy—all in floods of tears. The decorations had been hastily torn down.

Father spoke to them with perfect fortitude and serenity, and without one touch of bitterness, sentiment or self-pity. I have never marvelled at him more. His courage is no teeth-set, tight-lipped stoicism, but something much bigger and more natural—a power of seeing events immediately in scale and eliminating his own personal position completely from his perspective. Dr. McKenna (our Chairman) spoke and the Provost. Margot said a few words with great gallantry, and I finally had to speak too, but I was really afraid of not being able to command my voice. It was for *them* one minded so terribly—our splendid, devoted friends. They all (inevitably) sang 'Will ye no' come back again ?'

We went back to Ferguslie in the small hours and left, after a very short time in bed, next morning. We had a difficult send-off, at Glasgow, saying good-bye to faithful old supporters there, who came with tears and flowers. As we steamed out of the station I lay back feeling bruised from head to foot—and recoiling instinctively from the pile of newspapers that lay by my side—their head-lines stinging me like adders. I looked across at Father in an agony of solicitude (for I knew how the good-byes had moved him)—then meeting his calm gaze I realised suddenly that he had already made his peace with events. Groping wildly for a life-line that might draw me into smooth waters by his side, I asked in as steady a voice as possible: 'I suppose you haven't by any chance got an old P. G. Wodehouse in your bag that you could lend me ?' A smile of instant response, mingled I thought with relief, lit up his face as he replied triumphantly: 'being a provident man I have got in my bag, not one, but *four brand new* ones !' My wounds were healed—for I knew that he was invulnerable."

So ended, after thirty-eight years, Asquith's life and career in the House of Commons. This time the regrets were universal and sincere. The "last of the Romans," as someone said, had gone down. Among a thousand letters which reached him, he specially treasured one which came from Conservative headquarters.

Travellers' Club,
Pall Mall, S.W.1.

30*th October*, 1924.

My dear Asquith,

I saw the result of the Paisley election with real regret. It would be an impertinence on my part to say more, but I think you would have felt pleased if you could have heard the genuine expressions of regret and sympathy which were uttered spontaneously by typists and lift boys working in the Unionist Central Offices.

May I send a special message of sympathy to Mrs. Asquith and your daughter?

Believe me,
Yours very sincerely,
Stanley Baldwin.

II

Within a few days he received a letter from the King:

The King to Asquith.

Buckingham Palace.

Nov. 4*th*, 1924.

My dear Mr. Asquith,

Nothing in connection with the General Election has caused me more regret than that you should not have been returned to Parliament. Your absence from Westminster especially in these abnormal and anxious days, is a national loss. Apart from my strong personal regard and respect for you, and remembering that you were my Prime Minister (in very difficult times) for six years and also served my Father in that capacity, I feel strongly that after your long and eminent career, you should not be subject to further political contests, with all their attendant turmoil and unpleasantness, nor the exacting, wearing life of the House of Commons which is in store for the successful. For these reasons it would be a matter of the greatest satisfaction to me to confer upon you a Peerage.

This would enable you to continue, though under more peaceful conditions, your Parliamentary life, bringing to the House of Lords your distinguished abilities, vast experience and gifted speech, to the great advantage of its deliberations; while in the event of your absence from the Commons, such an arrangement would be welcomed by all the shades of opinion throughout the country.

If I could persuade you to do this, it would give *me great pleasure.*

Believe me,
Very sincerely yours,
George R.I.

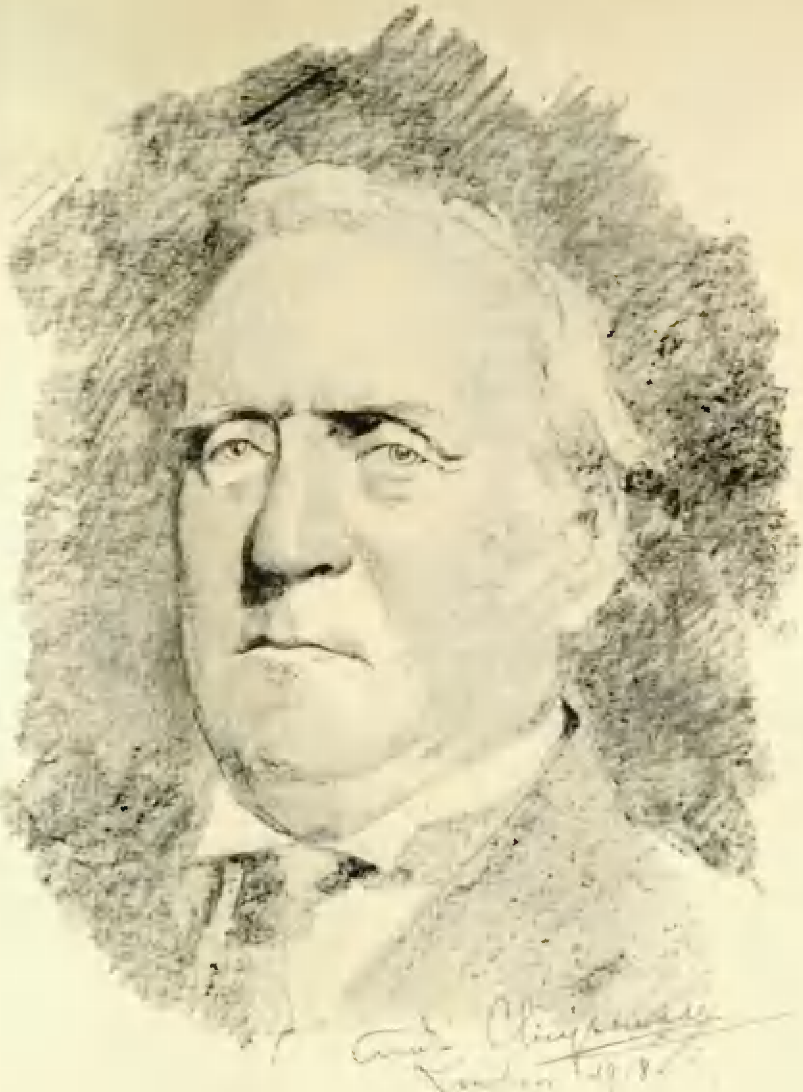
Asquith, as he has recorded, specially appreciated the King's tact and kindness in writing "in the interregnum between two Governments, so that it would be entirely his own proposal."

He took time to consider, and at the suggestion of his son, Arthur, who was a Director of the Sudan Plantations Company, went for a six-weeks' tour in Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and the Sudan. His wife decided that she would not accompany him on this journey. She wished him to get quite clear of all the political troubles of recent months, and this she thought would be impossible if his travelling companion was the one who had shared most intimately all his thoughts and anxieties. He did indeed get much refreshment from the new scenes in which he found himself, but he was by no means quit of trouble. In Egypt, where he was the guest of Lord and Lady Allenby at the Residency in Cairo, he fell on the tragic moment of the murder of Sir Lee Stack, and left his impressions on record in the letters home which have already been published in his *Memories and Reflections*. A few extracts may be given here :

"I went on Wednesday about noon with Lord Allenby to have an interview with the King, who lives in a gaudy French Second Empire Palace not far from here. He is Turkish in appearance, a little over 50, educated in Italy, knows Paris and London, and speaks excellent French. He talked with a good deal of frankness and self-commiseration about his own (truly ridiculous) position as a 'Constitutional monarch.' We had scarcely got home and sat down to lunch when the news came of the shooting in one of the principal streets, by a gang of seven to ten well-organised murderers, of Stack. He was brought into the Residency and lingered on for about thirty-six hours, but his recovery was hopeless from the first. His aide-de-camp and chauffeur were also wounded, but not mortally. Such a thing has never happened even in this country before, and Stack, though not a man of great brains, was universally liked. The wretched Egyptian Ministers, who from Zaghlul downwards have been denouncing all English officials and declaring that they must be got rid of, came cowering and huddling to the Residency, where, as Allenby grimly remarked to me, they were not 'genially' received. They are completely panic-stricken, and as they are to a large extent morally responsible, they are trembling in their shoes."

"November 26. Government House, Jerusalem. I am looking out of the window at the Dead Sea, which is only a few miles away, and I am going to start very soon for a drive to Jericho. Yesterday I explored the Garden of Gethsemane, the Pool of Bethesda, Golgotha (where the Empress Helena discovered the Cross) and the supposed tomb from which the Resurrection took place. So I am saturated for the moment with Biblical lore, and shall complete the tale to-morrow when I move on to Nazareth and the Lake of Galilee.

If it were not for these historic associations no one, who could go anywhere else, would visit Palestine. It is just what I expected to find—an arid, rocky, hummocky, treeless expanse, with ranges of hills here and



H. H. A.
Pencil drawing by André Cluysenaar.
(1918)

there rising to no great height. There are no beautiful or even interesting buildings, except the Great Mosque, which stands on the site of Solomon's Temple at Jerusalem, and the nave of the Church of the Nativity at Bethlehem.

There are less than a million people in the country, which is roughly the size of Wales—of whom about one-tenth are Jews, and the remainder Christians and Arabs, the Arabs being three-fourths of the whole. I suppose you could not find anywhere a worse representation of any one of the three religions—especially the Christian.

The Jews are increasing (mainly from the less civilised parts of the East of Europe) as the result of the Zionist propaganda, and no doubt are much better looked after and happier here than they were in the wretched places from which they were exported. But the talk of making Palestine into a Jewish 'National Home' seems to me as fantastic as it always has done.

The administration is run by the English with their usual efficiency—new roads, new drainage, new schools, new lighting, afforestation, colonization, etc. Jerusalem, which used to be one of the foulest cities in the East, is cleaner and better kept than Cairo—largely owing to the energies of the Governor, Ronald Storrs.

I am quartered with the High Commissioner, Herbert Samuel, who is the supreme dictator here. One of his edicts prevented public advertisements throughout the country—with the result that you rarely, if ever, see a poster. Government House, where he lives, is two or three miles from the city, and is one of the most singular erections anywhere. It was built by the Germans at an enormous cost before the war, by order of the Kaiser, after his visit here when he preached in the Lutheran Church. It was intended to be what they call a 'hospice' (for the entertainment of German pilgrims and tourists), and is upon the most grandiose scale. In the courtyard on a niche is a huge bronze statue of the Kaiser, dressed as a Crusader, and holding a shield like that carried by Richard Cœur de Lion.

The house is of course far too big to live in, and impossible to make warm and comfortable. H. S. and his wife live here a simple Jewish life, with occasional outbursts (there is going to be one to-night) of official hospitality. He has been brought under every typical English influence—Balliol, House of Commons, Cabinet—and has an excellent and very useful kind of intellect; he is rather formal, but kindly and wholly devoid of malignity; and above all things tenacious and *efficient*."

He pronounces Syria to be "a very superior country to the Holy Land, and Baalbec, the most wonderful ruins in the world—not even excepting Karnak," which he saw during a stay at Luxor in January. The Sudan, where he visited the great Sennar dam, he thought "not a place to go to for pleasure—a huge monotonous featureless plain"—a judgment which he might possibly have revised if he had been able to go a few hundred miles further south. But the water-journey down the Nile from Wady Halfa to Assuan was "quite delightful."

III

1924–1925 Age 72 During these six weeks of travel he made up his mind to accept the King's offer of a Peerage, but not without many searchings of heart. Inwardly convinced as he might be that he could not again expose himself to the mortifications and vicissitudes of electioneering as they were at this time for members of the Liberal Party, it was a wrench to shut himself off definitely from the House of Commons, and he had a natural reluctance to change his status from commoner to peer. But the choice, as he finally faced it, was either to retire finally from public life or to take the chance offered of continuing it with a seat in the House of Lords. He knew all the drawbacks of that position, especially for the leader of the Liberal Party, but he still felt himself to be physically strong and mentally alert, and the idea of being cut off from the public life and deprived of all opportunity of making his voice heard on public affairs was one which he could not bring himself to face. Had there been such a thing as a "safe seat" available to a Liberal leader at this moment his decision would probably have been different.

So on 20th January he wrote to the King:

Asquith to the King.

SIR,

I have ventured to take full advantage of your Majesty's kind permission that I should delay a definite reply to the gracious offer of a Peerage, conveyed to me in November last, until I should have had time for mature and deliberate consideration.

The consideration involved, as your Majesty will understand, matters both personal and political of perhaps exceptional delicacy and difficulty. As the result, I have now the honour respectfully to submit my grateful acceptance of your Majesty's proposal.

It would be impertinent in me to trouble your Majesty with any survey of doubts and hesitations (not wholly of a selfish kind) which seemed to warrant a certain suspense of judgment. Such as they were, they have now been removed. And I may be permitted to say that they were completely overcome by my deep and abiding sense of obligation and affection to the King, whom it was my privilege from the first moment of his reign to serve for so many successive years as his Chief Minister. Never was service more willingly given by a Minister or more abundantly rewarded by the constant and unfailing consideration and the unbroken confidence of the Sovereign, of which I shall always treasure this mark of your Majesty's gracious favour as the consummation and the seal.

If it should be your Majesty's pleasure, in accordance with precedent, to confer upon me the dignity of an Earl, I should propose to take the title of Oxford, which has fine traditions in our history, and which was given by Queen Anne to her Prime Minister, Robert Harley.

The King answered :

The King to Asquith.

YORK COTTAGE,
SANDRINGHAM, NORFOLK.
Jan. 23, 1925.

MY DEAR MR. ASQUITH,

It is with great satisfaction that I have received your letter of the 20th inst., accepting in, if I may say so, such charming terms, the offer of a Peerage, which it was my pleasure to make to you in November last, and I am touched by the kind reference which you make to our mutual relation to each other since my accession. I can quite realise and appreciate the various difficulties which required careful consideration before a decision could be arrived at. But I venture to think that, great as your wrench must be in leaving the House of Commons, where you have for long held so eminent a position, you have acted rightly. It is a gain to the public of England and the Empire that the House of Lords should have as its leaders on either side some of the foremost Statesmen of the time.

Your Peerage will of course be an Earldom, and subject to the necessary references to the College of Arms which will at once be made, I shall be very glad that the historic title of Earl of Oxford should now be restored in your favour.

I have informed the Prime Minister.

Looking forward to having the pleasure of seeing you on my return to London next month.

Believe me, my dear Mr. Asquith,
Very sincerely yours,
GEORGE R.I.

Among scores of letters of congratulation, his letter-bag reveals a few protests and grumblings from correspondents claiming descent from Robert Harley, who appeared to think that they had patent rights in the dormant title of Oxford, but the general view was that, if Asquith were to be ennobled, no title could have fitted him better. A few pedants again objected that there was no precedent when he proposed to perpetuate his own name by adding " and Asquith," but if precedents were lacking, it was an ingenious innovation which may properly set one for eminent men in similar circumstances.

The University of Oxford, it must be admitted, was less forthcoming in its appreciation of the man who had taken its name and was generally acknowledged to be its most illustrious son. For when in June of this year he became candidate for the Chancellorship of the University, in the reasonable hope that he would be elected without a contest, the Conservative Party among the graduates

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decided that their consciences would not permit them even to acquiesce in this high office being held by the author of the Parliament Act, Welsh Disestablishment, and other enormities in the Conservative eye. They had for long a difficulty in finding a candidate to take up the ungracious part of challenging Oxford's election. The Archbishop of Canterbury among others declined in a letter which was a sharp rebuke to intolerance—and in a letter to *The Times* (May 19) Lord Birkenhead gave Asquith a generous, if unavailing, testimonial:

> "Lord Oxford rendered to the British nation and to the British Empire an imperishable service. He brought a united nation into the war, and in so doing he made victory attainable. And, again, as the head of the first Coalition Government, he undertook and carried through the formidable task of enforcing conscription upon a nation to whose habits and traditions it was wholly alien. These services seem to me to be greater than any living Oxford man has rendered to the nation and to the Empire. It can hardly be disputed that Lord Oxford can carry on, in at least equal succession, the traditions of Curzon and Milner. Who else can? . . .
>
> Lord Oxford is the greatest living Oxonian. If he were a Conservative he would be elected by acclamation. To reject him because he is a Liberal is to admit partisan prejudices as narrow as they are discreditable."

When finally the new Lord Chancellor in the Conservative Government (Lord Cave) consented to stand, and the election went forward on political and clerical lines, the result was a foregone conclusion. It is almost certain that, if it could have been decided by the resident graduates and teachers, Oxford would have been elected by a large majority, but the hoisting of the political flag brought to the poll the outvoters, largely clerical, who form the great majority of the electors. "Zadok, the priest, and Abiathar, the priest, with their followers in the rural parsonages, were too much for us," was Asquith's comment in reply to a sympathetic letter from Mr. St. Loe Strachey. In after years Lord Grey was elected without opposition to succeed Cave, but he was not, in the eyes of the University, the prime author of mischief, as Asquith was.

That high offender was, however, rewarded by his Sovereign, who renewed the offer of the Garter which had been declined in December 1918. This time he accepted it. He was also appointed a member of the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council and he took special pride and pleasure in returning to his old profession in the capacity of a Judge. Another honour—the Freedom of the City of London—without which no statesman's career is thought to be complete, was conferred on him on 13th May this year, and the speech which Mr. Baldwin, now Prime Minister, made at the Luncheon following this ceremony gave him special pleasure. Speaking for the House of Commons, Mr. Baldwin said that its members, whether they agreed with him or not, "had always respected and admired Mr. Asquith as a gentleman," and added: "All through that time, I recognised, as all of us do, the stability of his character, the serenity of his temper, his freedom from jealousies and enmities, the magnitude of his mind and the plenitude of his utterance."

Oxford's comments and letters show him enjoying life, and in good spirits all through this year. By this time he had moved from 20 Cavendish Square to 44 Bedford Square, but the new house was a spacious one with beautiful high-ceilinged Georgian rooms and a charming study and library away from the street. He read all sorts of books, worked industriously at his *Fifty Years of Parliament*, and various literary studies, went a motor tour in Provence, lived in the company he liked, and, being released from the House of Commons, felt free to come and go as the spirit moved him. In November he was greatly saddened by the death of a favourite niece, but his letters show him following with keen interest and some amusement the doings of his youngest son "Puffin," who had gone to America to visit his sister, Princess Bibesco, at Washington, and thence made his way with her to Hollywood:

> "Puffin writes enthusiastically from Hollywood of the good time which he and Elizabeth are having in the centre of the film world. They are guests of Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford; Charlie Chaplin drops in to lunch; Lilian Gish hovers about in the offing; and (to Puffin the climax) he has had ten minutes with Pauline Frederick. *Que voulez vous?*"

He took his seat in the House of Lords on 17th February having as his supporters Lord Balfour and Lord Curzon; and his maiden speech in that Assembly was a tribute to Lord Curzon who died on 20th March this year. His first impressions of the House of Lords are somewhat bluntly recorded.

> "So far I have not heard, with the exception of poor Curzon's last, even a decent speech in the Lords . . . the standard of speaking there is deplorably low. Men like —— and —— would hardly be listened to in an average County Council. They mumble away a lot of spineless and disconnected platitudes."

It cannot be said that he was assiduous in his Parliamentary duties as a Peer, but he treated the House of Lords with respect, and it gave him the opportunity of intervening, as much as he thought necessary, on affairs of the moment. One of the best of his Free Trade speeches was made to this mainly hostile Assembly in December 1925.

CHAPTER LIX

LAST DAYS AS LIBERAL LEADER

Difficulties of the Liberal Party—The separate organisations—The Lloyd George Fund—Oxford's view—The Million Fund—Its failure—Oxford's precarious position—The General Strike—Differences with Mr. Lloyd George—Letter to Mr. Lloyd George—Its publication—A wrong impression—Attitude of the Party—Mr. Lloyd George's Manchester speech—His strong strategic position—Deputations to Oxford—His illness and resignation—A last appearance.

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THOUGH the reunited Liberal Party had shown no rift in public, its affairs had by no means run smoothly behind the scenes during these months. After the election of 1923 it quickly became evident that the Independent Liberals had presumed too much in supposing, as they did, that Mr. Lloyd George would consent to a fusion of organisation and funds, after he had joined forces with them. The reunion of 1923 was a last-minute affair and it sufficed for the time being that he had made a handsome contribution to the election of that year from the large resources which fell to his share, when the Coalition broke up. But the negotiations which took place between him and the representatives of the Independent Liberals in 1924 were difficult and troublesome ; and it appeared in the end that Mr. Lloyd George did not contemplate either the dismantling of his separate organisation or the fusion of his fund. That, he claimed, was a personal fund hedged about with conditions which made it doubtful whether he could properly contribute to any purpose except the defence of Free Trade or the combating of Socialism, and in any case he was not willing to let it pass out of his personal control or to part with it except on conditions which he laid down himself.

The story of the negotiations which led to this conclusion was told subsequently by Lord Gladstone in a letter to *The Times*,[1] and the facts need only be briefly stated here. Mr. Lloyd George sharply criticised the organisation of the Independents, and objected to their plan of running a sufficient number of candidates at the 1924 election—500 or at least 450—to convince the electors that they were making a serious bid for power. The delays while these matters were being debated held up the preparations for the election, and lack of funds at the end required the number of candidates to be reduced from the 500 aimed at to 343. It was the view of the Independents that this shortage of candidates largely contributed to the disaster that followed; and the argument that the Liberal Party would not in the best of circumstances be in a position to form a Government undoubtedly had weight with an electorate which at that moment was crying out for strong Government. Reflection and recrimination in these matters did not improve tempers, and at the end of 1924 it was clearer than ever that the Lloyd George Fund was a serious seed of mischief in the Liberal Party.

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[1] *The Times*, 11th June, 1924.

All through his official life Oxford had held firmly to the traditional view that the leader of a party should have nothing to do with the party fund. He thought it highly inadvisable that the leader should be in a position of paymaster to his supporters, and he objected to any relationship between the leader and the contributors to the Fund which might lead to the supposition that his policy was influenced by their wishes or their conduct by his benefactions. The Liberal Party Fund up to this time had been vested in the Chief Whip which meant that it was at the disposal of the party for any purpose which its leaders, interpreting the general sense of the party, approved or thought necessary. The Chief Whip exercised his power purely in virtue of his official position. When he ceased to be Chief Whip, the Fund passed to his successor, and neither the leader of the party nor any other individual was in a position to attach conditions to its use or to refuse contributions from it for purposes which the organisers and agents thought necessary.

There was no room in this theory for a personal fund controlled by one leader and subject to conditions which he or his contributors might impose; and Asquith objected on principle to the existence of such a fund. But apart from this general objection, the separate fund with a separate organisation was an obstacle to reunion and a latent, which might at any time become an open, challenge to the recognised Headquarters organisation and to the leader himself. It did in fact develop in that direction during the year 1925 when it needed a patient and skilful diplomacy to harmonise Mr. Lloyd George's separate land campaign with the claim of the National Liberal Federation to be the official exponent of policy. The reconciliation was achieved after much coming and going between the two camps at the end of the year, and the official seal was put to an agreed Land Policy at a Conference called by the Executive Committee of the Federation in the Kingsway Hall on 17th

February, 1926, at which both Oxford and Mr. Lloyd George were present and spoke. But by this time Oxford's patience was fairly exhausted, and he was heard to say that he never wished to hear another word about the Lloyd George Fund.

It was easier said than done. For a time high hopes had been built on the Million Fund Appeal launched in January 1925 under the auspices of the National Liberal Federation, with the definite purpose of releasing the party from this entanglement and making it independent of all outside assistance. But by the end of the year 1925 it was plain that this appeal, though of great value in replenishing the Treasuries of local Associations and bringing temporary relief at Headquarters, would not yield the large sum necessary to enable effective propaganda to be carried on and another general election to be financed. From the beginning the organisers of the Million Fund found themselves in a dilemma from which eventually there was no escape. The Lloyd George Fund was by this time a matter of public knowledge, and a large number of those who were appealed to wanted to know why this stupendous effort was necessary, if there was in fact a sufficient sum of money for all present needs in the hands of one of the leaders. The embarrassment which followed has been described in the *Life of Sir Robert Hudson*, who was at this time Treasurer of the National Liberal Federation:

> To launch a great appeal for funds with the avowed object of making the party independent of one of its leaders was plainly impossible, and yet no other explanation met the case. If they could have said that the Lloyd George Fund was a myth or that it was exhausted, the way would have been clear; but when they said merely that it was not available, or hinted that, if available, it was not desirable for them to avail themselves of it, they were immediately asked why, and the question could not be answered without raising a controversy which would have been ruinous to the fund and extremely damaging to the unity of the party. The circumstances were fatal to success on any large scale. A big fund might have been raised on the basis that there was no money, but it could not be raised on the basis that there was a large sum of money which for reasons impossible to explain could not be drawn upon.
>
> In this way the Lloyd George Fund hung over the "Million Fund," and finally extinguished it. The small subscribers ear-marked their subscriptions for their local Associations; the bigger ones wanted to know more of the facts before they gave freely. A high proportion of the subscriptions took the form of promises, which were unlikely to mature unless the situation was cleared up.[1]

The upshot was that at the beginning of 1926 the Liberal Party was in a state of necessity which its authorised leader was not in a position to relieve, whereas Mr. Lloyd George was in possession of a large fund which, so far as the control of money could decide the matter, made him master of the situation.

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[1] *Sir Robert Hudson, a Memoir*, pp. 172–173.

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II

The failure of the Million Fund made Oxford's position extremely precarious. If any serious difference of opinion arose between him and Mr. Lloyd George, and it became necessary for him to call upon the party to support him against Mr. Lloyd George, he would in effect be asking it to cut itself off from its supplies and march with him into a stony and barren wilderness. This was to all intents and purposes the position in which he found himself in May 1926, when he took serious exception to Mr. Lloyd George's attitude on the General Strike.

The Strike broke out on 3rd May, and on the same day there was a meeting of the Shadow Cabinet which both Oxford and Mr. Lloyd George attended. At this the decision was taken—and it seemed to be unanimous—to condemn the Strike and (without prejudice to any criticism at the proper time) to support the Government in resisting and defeating it. In pursuance of this decision Oxford, Lord Grey, Sir John Simon, and others either spoke from their places in Parliament or made statements in the *British Gazette*—the emergency organ of the Government—with, as they supposed, the approval of all their colleagues. But in his speeches in the House of Commons, Mr. Lloyd George struck a different note, being more emphatic in his condemnation of the Government than of the strikers; and when the Chief Whip summoned another meeting of the Shadow Cabinet for 10th May, he wrote a letter (9th May) announcing his intention of absenting himself, and expressly stating that his reason for doing so was that he dissented from the line taken by "the leader of the party and others wielding great authority in the party," and that he thought the action of the Government "precipitate, unwarrantable, and mischievous."

In the subsequent correspondence he explained that he was only anxious to "avoid the unpleasantness of provoking discussion" upon temporary differences and that no more significance attached to his absence than to the occasional non-attendance of other leaders of the party which had never been the subject of rebuke. Oxford declined to accept this explanation. In his view Mr. Lloyd George's definite statement in his letter that he could not associate himself with the action of his colleagues in supporting the Government and

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his denunciation of the conduct of the Government as "precipitate, unwarrantable, and mischievous" gave his absence the same significance as would have attached to that of a Minister from a Cabinet after a similar communication to the Prime Minister. In the case of an actual Cabinet no Prime Minister could have received such a communication without inferring from it that the absentee intended to resign his office and take a line of his own, and Oxford's view was that on so critical an occasion, the leader of the party was bound to draw the same inference from the absence of his colleague from the Shadow Cabinet. This was not only his view; it was the view also of the twelve members of the Shadow Cabinet, who on 1st June, wrote a letter to *The Times* signifying their entire adhesion to the course he had taken.

A day after Mr. Lloyd George dispatched his letter the General Strike broke down, and there were peacemakers who urged that the incident should be regarded as closed. But on this occasion Oxford was adamant. Whatever might be said about the blundering of the Government, the General Strike seemed to him to raise the simple issue whether Parliament should be coerced by outside pressure, and upon that he held it to be the duty of all Parliamentarians, and especially of Liberal Parliamentarians, to stand firm in its defence. The thing called "direct action," whether set on foot by revolutionaries, reactionaries, or unwilling "Trade Unionists," was, in his view, the most deadly menace to free representative Government; and that Mr. Lloyd George should have parted company with him on such an occasion seemed to him to make an impassable gulf between them. He took a few days to consider the matter, and then sent the reply to Mr. Lloyd George's letter of 9th May, which made the final break:

Asquith to Mr. Lloyd George.

44 BEDFORD SQUARE, W.C.1.
May 20th.

MY DEAR LLOYD GEORGE,

I have refrained from writing to you until the Strike was over, and the life of the country had resumed its normal course.

I should not be doing my duty as Leader of the Liberal Party if I did not now convey to you my regret of the course which you have pursued in the greatest domestic crisis which the country has had to confront in your time or mine.

I need not remind you that on the day when the General Strike already declared was about to come into operation—Monday, May 3rd—we discussed with our colleagues at a meeting of the "Shadow" Cabinet the proper attitude of the Liberal Party. We were all of us critical of some of the steps which, in the origin and progress of the Coal Dispute, the

Government had taken, or omitted to take. But we were *united* in our determination to condemn, and to join with such influence as we could exercise or command in resisting the ill-advised resort of the Trade Union Council to the anti-social campaign of a General Strike.

The next day, May 4th, I took the first opportunity open to me to declare and explain in the House of Lords what I had then every reason to believe, and still believe, to be the practically unanimous judgment of our party. I have read over my speech, and I find in it nothing to qualify or amend.

I did not fail to point out that in my opinion a better use might have been made by the Government of the respite of nine months purchased by the subsidy for the maturing of constructive proposals in the Coal Dispute. But I urged as strongly as I could that this was not the moment for criticism of the past in any of its aspects and that our paramount duty was to concentrate on the task of frustrating the common danger which threatened the whole nation. I added two or three practical suggestions towards the attainment of peace.

A few days later, when we were in the thick of the conflict, I addressed through the only available organ, the *British Gazette*, a short message to help to hearten the mass of the people in their splendid struggle against the coercion of a new Dictatorship. Lord Grey wrote in the same sense, and a powerful contribution to a right understanding of the case was made by Sir John Simon in the House of Commons.

None of these declarations were in any sense unsympathetic to the miners, still less were they hostile to the principles of the legitimate activities of trade unions, which Liberal legislation has done so much in the past to safeguard.

I summoned another meeting of the " Shadow " Cabinet on Monday, May 10th. All my colleagues attended with the notable exception of yourself. The reasons for your absence, as set out in a letter dated the same morning, seem to me to be wholly inadequate.

The main ground alleged was that declarations have been made in the Government Press by the Leader of the Party (i.e. myself) and other Liberals of authority from which you felt obliged to dissent. You added that you could not see your way " to join in declarations which condemned the General Strike, while refraining from criticism of the Government, who are equally, if not more responsible."

Whether you were or were not at this moment aware of the terms of my speech in the House of Lords, I do not know. Though for the moment full and accurate reporting had (as I think most short-sightedly) been rendered impossible, yet the gist of what I said could easily have been ascertained.

I regard this as a very grave matter. We had reached the most critical moment of the Strike. It was, in my judgment, the primary duty of all who were responsible for Liberal policy, and certainly not least of the Chairman of the Parliamentary Party in the House of Commons, at such a time to meet together for free and full discussion, and to contribute their counsels to the common stock. Your refusal to do so I find impossible to reconcile with my conception of the obligations of political comradeship.

I should have been glad to stop at this point. Your speeches in the House of Commons were, of necessity, so scantily and inadequately reported that I make no comment upon them.

But I cannot pass by without notice of the article which, entirely on your own account, you thought it right when it was above all things necessary to demonstrate the essential unity of the country, to contribute to the American press.

I have now had the opportunity of reading the full text. It contains a desponding, though highly-coloured, picture of our national straits. It predicts a long duration of the conflict, and the ultimate wearing down of the steadfastness of our people through "worry about their vanishing trade."

I cannot but deplore that such a presentation of the case should have been offered to the outside world, on the authority of an ex-Prime Minister of Great Britain and the Chairman of the Liberal Parliamentary Party.

It gives me real pain to have to write this letter. As you well know, it is not dictated by personal feelings.

Yours sincerely,
Oxford.

The article in the American press alluded to in the closing paragraphs of this letter was, in Asquith's view, the climax of the previous incidents. It both offended his sense of propriety and confirmed him in his suspicions of what was in Mr. Lloyd George's mind when he wrote his letter of 10th May. What, he asked himself, would have happened, if the Strike had been prolonged, and Mr. Lloyd George had taken the line which seemed to be indicated in that article ?

III

The reply having been despatched, Oxford went to stay with his friend, Mr. Geoffrey Howard, at Castle Howard in Yorkshire. It was a characteristic move ; he wished to have time to reflect on his next step, and meanwhile, to remove himself from the multitude of counsellors who offer advice on such occasions. But the next step was bound to be a communication to the public, and to make it effectively required just the kind of knowledge and skill in which Oxford had all his life been singularly deficient. His departure at that moment left his friends in a considerable difficulty. It was by this time generally known that there was a serious difference of opinion between him and Mr. Lloyd George and that he had taken decisive action. But if he meant it seriously, some sign on his part seemed to be necessary, and he was, therefore, asked to sanction a non-committal communiqué to the Press, stating that he would explain himself fully in a forthcoming speech. To this he replied

AT 44 BEDFORD SQUARE
(About 1926)

with a peremptory instruction by telegram from Castle Howard to publish his letter of 20th May, and from this it was impossible to move him. Mr. Lloyd George had, of course, to be apprised of the intention to publish, and he very naturally sent to the Press for publication on the same day his reply, which till then Oxford had not received.

The two letters—Oxford's of 20th May, and Mr. Lloyd George's reply—thus appeared together on 26th May, but not Mr. Lloyd George's letter of 9th May, to which Asquith's was the reply. This created the impression, which was never entirely removed, that Oxford had started the quarrel and was taking the offensive without provocation. Mr. Lloyd George's reply was skilful and effective. He passed lightly over the fact that he had definitely declared his dissent from the action of his colleagues, and represented his absence from the Shadow Cabinet as an endeavour not to make but avoid differences. Wherein, he asked, had he done wrong ? He had said nothing in public which clashed with the decision of the Shadow Cabinet ; his offence, if any, was only that he had urged a Liberal policy of conciliation, and supported the appeal of the Archbishop of Canterbury for a resumption of negotiations on the basis of calling off the General Strike. As for the American article, it had won the approval of the *Manchester Guardian*, and he was content with the opinion expressed by " the most honoured and venerated figure in British journalism."

Oxford had supposed that the mere statement of the facts in his letter of 20th May would carry conviction without further explanation or comment. To him it seemed self-evident that Mr. Lloyd George had intended to separate himself from his colleagues, if the Strike had been prolonged, and he had believed that the party would support him in refusing to continue a partnership which had broken down on so vital a point. The party, however, was mystified and puzzled. Some thought that Oxford was attaching an exaggerated importance to the ritual of Cabinet and Shadow Cabinet ; others thought it a venial offence on the part of a leader to have strayed too far to the left. Many thought that since the General Strike had collapsed, the incident should be buried. The first impression was by no means what Oxford expected or what might have been produced by a more careful presentment and explanation of the facts.

On 1st June he addressed a letter to the Chief Whip, Sir Godfrey Collins, replying to Mr. Lloyd George's second letter, and dealing with sundry other suggestions and suspicions with which the case

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had now become complicated. Once more he laid his stress on the central incident of Mr. Lloyd George's absence from the Shadow Cabinet, and insisted that, in view of his letter explaining his reasons, no other inference could be drawn than that he intended to withdraw from the party Councils and take a line of his own on the General Strike :

> "I have sat in many Cabinets under various Prime Ministers, and I have not known one of them who would not have treated such a communication from a colleague, sent at such a time, as equivalent to a resignation. I certainly so regarded it. Nor was the difference of attitude and policy which is announced one that in my judgment could be smoothed away, as a trivial matter of transient importance. It was clear and clean cut. If the leaders of the Liberal Party as a body had adopted Mr. Lloyd George's view, we should have been doing our best to weaken the authority of the Government, which was for the moment the embodiment and organ of the national self-defence against the gravest domestic danger which has threatened the country in our time. We felt that we were trustees of the traditions of the party and were under a special responsibility to see that it played a part worthy of its past."

There was, he went on to say, no question of "excommunication" or "ostracism." The leader of a party was neither a Pope nor an autocrat, but he had always claimed and exercised full liberty of choice as to his colleagues and advisers. "Mr. Lloyd George, in the exercise of his own judgment and for reasons of which I am the last to question the gravity, chose to separate himself, in the most formal manner, from our deliberations in a moment of great emergency. He was not driven out, he refused to come in." Finally, after combating the idea that he had shown himself anti-Liberal or reactionary in the coal-dispute, Oxford wound up with a very emphatic sentence which placed his own intentions beyond doubt.

> "In conclusion, I must add a few words as to my own personal position. I see that it is insinuated that I have been the, perhaps passive, vehicle of personal animosities. My record in these matters is well known to my fellow-countrymen, and I can afford to disregard base imputations on my honour. I am this month completing forty years of service to the Liberal Party. For a considerable part of the time I have been its Leader, and I have honestly striven, during the last two years, to recreate and to revive the broken fabric of Liberal unity. It has been a burdensome, and in some of its aspects, a thankless task. I will not continue to hold the leadership for a day unless I am satisfied that I retain in full measure the confidence of the party."

IV

Whatever Mr. Lloyd George's intentions may have been on 10th May, it was evident that he had no thought of resigning three weeks later. In a speech to the Manchester Reform Club on 4 June, he insisted that he had been excommunicated, and spoke scornfully of "the privilege of being a Liberal Shadow"—from which he had been "driven out into the sunlight." A fortnight later he wrote another article for the American press in which, with daring forgetfulness of the part which he himself had played since the War, he reproached "the official gang" with having "allowed Labour to capture the old Ark of the Covenant, which for over three centuries had been resting in the Liberal Temple," and declared that the forces which were now rallying to his side "contained the most thoughtful personalities of the party—men who have fretted for years over the lost opportunities of Liberalism." These men, he said, "whilst they have great respect for Lord Oxford, are not altogether sorry to see others, who are responsible for the fact that the party missed its greatest opportunity, taking a step which leaves advanced Liberalism free for the first time to fashion its course and to undertake its responsibilities."

The wizardry of these performances dazzled and confused the average party man. In three weeks Mr. Lloyd George had contrived to present the dispute as a struggle between "the official gang" and progressive Liberals, and he—the author of the 1918 election and Prime Minister of the Coalition—was now actually reproaching the man who had held the fort and striven unceasingly to keep Liberalism alive, with having allowed Labour to "capture the old Ark," and wasted the opportunity of Liberalism. It seemed impossible that men who had lived through these years could take this seriously, or that Liberals should not resent it.

Many no doubt did, but Mr. Lloyd George was in the strong position of being sessional chairman of the Liberal Party in the House of Commons, and members of Parliament, who elected their own chairman, found themselves in the unhappy position of being called upon suddenly to choose between the two leaders. To them in their reduced numbers party unity seemed of the highest importance, and they took the natural course of endeavouring to patch up the quarrel. After a first meeting on 3rd June, they sent Sir John Simon and Sir Godfrey Collins on a deputation to Bedford Square, but the two missionaries returned with little that was promising to report. In a letter to Sir Godfrey, Oxford repeated that the course he had taken "was taken after full reflection and with a complete absence of personal or sectional feeling," and said briefly that nothing had happened since his letter of the previous week to alter the view he then felt bound to express. The Parliamentary Party met again on 8th June, and by a majority of twenty to ten passed a resolution "deprecating the publicity given to the differences between the Liberal leaders," and expressing the "earnest hope that these leaders will use their best endeavours to restore unity in the ranks of the party." Three days later the Liberal and Radical Candidates Association met and after hearing an address from Mr. Lloyd George appointed a deputation of three[1] to wait on Oxford, with a report of its proceedings and to convey to him its "strong desire for complete unity within the party under his leadership."

He never saw that deputation, for on the following day he was taken ill, and his doctors were peremptory that he should cut himself off from all public affairs, including the engagement, which he had specially wished to keep, to speak at the annual meeting of the National Liberal Federation at Weston-super-Mare. In his absence, the Federation could do nothing but protest its loyalty to his leadership, while inwardly distracted about its plight in the dispute between him and Mr. Lloyd George. Whether the result would have been different if Oxford had been able to continue the fight must remain an open question, but his disablement at this moment put him definitely out of action, and reflection during his illness and convalescence made the thought of returning to the scene of friction and trouble more and more distasteful. The party had not rallied to him, as he expected, on an issue which he considered to be of supreme importance; many had failed even to understand his meaning and some had suspected him of venting a personal spite. The Parliamentary Party had passed what was equivalent to a vote of censure on his conduct; even among the faithful there were waverers. All the complimentary phrases and assurances of loyalty which had been employed at awkward moments could not conceal the fact that he was without the solid backing which was needed to enable him to maintain his position with dignity. Last, but not least, the organisation on which an official leader in his circumstances would naturally have depended, was almost without funds and saw itself in danger of being starved out by an opponent who was richly endowed. Every day it was becoming more and more evident that the principal organisations would have to choose between closing down a large part of their work or coming to terms with Mr. Lloyd George; and Oxford was determined that he would not be involved in any further disputes about the Lloyd George Fund.

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[1] Mr. Pringle, Mr. W. A. Jowett, and Mr. Ramsay Muir.

V

At the end of September he had a last conference with his colleagues at Lord Grey's house in Smith Square, but this time even the most faithful could not relieve the gloom. The same evening he wrote to his wife : 1926 Age 73–74

> "The alternatives are to lead a squalid faction fight against Ll. G. in which he would have all the sinews of war ; or to accept his money and patch up a hollow and humiliating alliance. I am quite resolved to do neither, so I shall *faire mes paquets* for which I have ample justification on other grounds, age, etc."

A week late he sent to his intimates the "confidential and secret" memorandum which though published later must find a place here :

> "The disintegration of the Liberal Party began with the Coupon Election of December 1918. It then received a blow from which it has never since recovered. I myself was turned out of a seat which I had held against the Tories for thirty-two years. All my leading colleagues in the House of Commons suffered the same fate. The Liberal members in the new House were reduced to a handful of little more than thirty. The bulk of the old Liberal parliamentary party deserted to the Coalition.
>
> I was much tempted to give up the formal leadership (for it had become nothing more) but I did not think it right to leave old friends, who had remained loyal, in the lurch ; and at the first available opportunity (Jan. 1920) I stood at the by-election for Paisley and was returned.
>
> The Coalition House of Commons (1919–1920) was the worst in which I have ever sat. The small band of Liberals whom Sir Donald Maclean had rallied were made to feel their impotence, and I myself, after I came back, was treated by the Coalition rank and file with studied contempt. I did my best with my colleagues to expose the stupidity and wickedness of reprisals in Ireland. Outside I urged (amidst the derision of the Coalition leaders) that Dominion Home Rule had become the only possible constructive policy. We opposed at its very outset and at every stage the legislation for the Safeguarding of Industries, supported as it was by so-called Free Traders like Sir Alfred Mond, who had become a member of the Coalition Cabinet.
>
> Those were the darkest days for Liberalism which I have ever known. The manifest failure of the Black and Tan regime in Ireland, administered by a Liberal Coalitionist, Sir Hamar Greenwood, and strenuously defended by Mr. Lloyd George, and its growing unpopularity here, in time began to disquiet the Unionists members of the Coalition ; and it was they (if we may believe Sir Austen Chamberlain) who were the first to urge its abandonment, with the substitution of the only possible alternative—Dominion Home Rule. After we had been brought to the verge of war by the adventure of Chanak, a section of the Conservatives, already embittered by the 'betrayal' of Unionists, became mutinous, and, under the leadership of Mr. Bonar Law and Mr. Baldwin, brought about the downfall of the Coalition, and the formation of a Bonar Law Government.

The folly of Mr. Baldwin, after Mr. Bonar Law's death, in hoisting the Protectionist flag, brought about a strong movement for 'Liberal Reunion.' The fortunes of Free Trade were at stake, and for the purpose of the election of 1923 we joined forces with Mr. Lloyd George and the bulk of his Coalition or National Liberals. In the Parliament then elected, the 'reunited' Liberals were a respectable if not a formidable minority.

We have now for nearly three years been trying the experiment of 'Liberal Reunion.' There is not one of us that does not know that in practice it has turned out to be a fiction, if not a farce. The control of the Party has throughout been divided between two separate authorities: the Liberal Central Office and Mr. Lloyd George's rival machine—the former very scantily, and the latter very richly endowed. Things came very nearly to a crisis a year ago when the 'Land Policy' as embodied in the Green Book was let loose, and followed up by an intensive and expansive propaganda. I insisted upon its being submitted to a representative Conference before it was incorporated in the Party programme. Prolonged negotiations between Sir Donald Maclean and Mr. Phillipps on the one side, and Mr. Lloyd George on the other, showed that he regarded his accumulated fund as at his own disposal, to be given to, or withheld from, the Central Office of the Party, as a dole, upon such conditions as he thought fit to impose. I was driven myself last December to the humiliating task of making a personal appeal to the better-to-do among our followers to come to the rescue and provide us with a wholly independent fund of adequate amount. Many generous contributions were made, but the fact remains that at this moment our Central Office is faced in the near future with the certainty of serious and perhaps fatal financial stress, in relief of which it is idle, in the present condition of the Party, to expect that a repetition of last year's appeal or any other expedient would meet with substantial response.

Meanwhile the rival organisation, well supplied with material resources, is being enlarged in every direction and has been recruited at its Headquarters quite recently by an influx of skilled wire-pullers and propagandists.

Under such conditions, to talk of Liberal unity as a thing which either has been, or has any fair prospect of being, achieved, seems me to be an abuse of language. If there are those who take a more sanguine view, I can only express a sincere hope that they may prove to be right.

I come now to my own personal position, which I have had to reconsider from every point of view, public and private, since the differences which arose in the early summer over the General Strike. After the fullest consideration, I find nothing to withdraw or qualify in my letter of June last to Sir Godfrey Collins. There are, it appears, not a few people in the Party who think that I acted on inadequate and even unworthy grounds. No one has ever accused me before of being actuated in public matters by personal motives, and my career, which is sufficiently well known to the Party and the public, might, I think, have spared me any such imputation. In my judgment, then and now, grave matters of principle, vital to the Liberal Party and to its harmonious and effective working, were in peril.

I am equally resolved not to take any part, direct or indirect, in a sectional controversy in the Party, either about Leadership or funds.

I am now in my seventy-fifth year. I have been for the best part of half a century in public life. I have been Prime Minister for a longer consecutive time than anyone during the last 100 years, and for a still longer time I have been Leader of the Liberal Party. During the whole of that time I have given my time and strength without stint or reserve to the service of the Party and the State. From the principles of Liberalism, as I have always understood them, and understand them still, I have never swerved either to the right or left, and I never shall.

I should therefore, in any case, consider that I had earned my title to release. But during the last few months I have had a serious warning, which I did not expect, but cannot ignore. My health, which has never troubled me before, gave way, and although it is now restored, I can no longer count upon it as I always have done in the past. The anxieties and responsibilities of Leadership, which do not diminish in these days, are enough to tax the strongest, and ought not to be undertaken or continued by anyone who cannot be reasonably sure that he can stand the strain.

I therefore feel it my duty to lay down the Leadership, and this decision, come to after much reflection and with many regrets, must be regarded as irrevocable.

OXFORD AND ASQUITH."

CHAPTER LX

ILLNESS AND DEATH

His first breakdown—A sequel of the General Strike—Its political consequences—Subsequent rallies and relapses—Death, 15th February, 1928—Impressions from various hands. C. A.

1926–1928 THESE disturbing events came at an inopportune time for Asquith. He was wrestling to finish one of his books, whose publication was overdue; writing with reluctance and effort, and unwilling to allow anything to pass from his hands until every reference had been religiously verified, he was bearing between the duties of authorship and politics as heavy a load as his seventy-three years could stand. To this was added the anxiety caused by Mr. Lloyd George's defection and the acceptance which it seemed to find with much of the rank and file of the party. As already recorded, he had intended to be present at the Annual Meeting of the National Liberal Federation at Weston-super-Mare and there to confront the doubters, to present his apologia, and to claim an unlimited vote of confidence: and this he would, if the illness had not interposed, very likely have succeeded in doing. But on the very eve of this momentous journey he had a sort of seizure which deprived him temporarily of the use of his legs. In his absence it was decided not to debate the details of his controversy with Mr. Lloyd George; and the Resolution of Confidence in him, which was passed unanimously, though warm and generous in its terms to him personally, yet expressed "an earnest desire to retain the co-operation of all Liberals," which, so far as it implied co-operation on his part with Mr. Lloyd George, he had decided to be impossible.

This combination of events left him deeply stricken. His health for over seventy years had been as nearly perfect as may be; he had taken its maintenance in all conditions for granted, and its sudden défaillance left him afflicted and bewildered. The disaffection of a large body of the party was an added blow and one that he could not endure. The iniquity of the General Strike seemed to him so patent, so glaring that he thought the facts need only be stated to carry conviction to every mind. But this seemingly was not to be. If the reality of leadership were denied him, he was not the man to pursue its shadow or to be propitiated by the deferential and diplomatic phrase with which half-hearted followers were prepared to disguise the impairment of their allegiance. In the autumn of the same year he resigned the office—if such it be—of Leader.

In the interval his health had somewhat recovered: and on 15th October he was able, though with great anxiety on his own part and that of his friends, to bid farewell in a speech at Greenock to the party which he had led with such inflexible steadiness through eighteen years of triumph and disaster. His closing words were:

> "Let none of you, and especially let none of the younger among you, be content to think that the mission of Liberalism is exhausted. The new problems which confront us, and they are many and grave, are not outside the ambit of the old faith. Keep that faith; carry on the torch which we, who have done our best to keep it alight, hand over to your custody. Resist all the allurements of short cuts and compromises. Look neither to the right nor to the left, but keep straight on." (Greenock, Oct. 15, 1926.)

The meeting, he recorded, was "unique in my experience; at moments thrilling in its intensity. There were a lot of my old and trusty friends from Paisley there, as well as good and true men and women from all parts of Scotland. It was sad, however necessary, to have to cause such pain. But I have not a doubt that I have taken the only wise and honourable course."

The next few months he spent in comparative happiness among his books, mainly at The Wharf. But early in 1927, on rising from a table, he again felt a loss of power in one leg: and though he instantly recovered, and walked from the room quite normally, the trouble reasserted itself. He had for some months to submit, with infinite repugnance, to the helplessness of an invalid, being wheeled in a chair from room to room. A deep gloom and a sort of numbness settled on his spirit, but in the autumn he seemed to rally again, left the chair, and at North Berwick and elsewhere was able to go on motoring expeditions and picnics with gleams of his old enjoyment. But shortly afterwards fell a third and what was to prove a fatal blow. He lingered in a state of coma and alternating consciousness into 1928 and died on the 15th February.

Some time before his death he had expressed the wish that there might be no public funeral. This wish was respected, and he was laid to rest, after a service of great beauty, in the quiet village cemetery of Sutton Courtney. A memorial service was subsequently held at Westminster Abbey.

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We may assemble here certain impressions of the subject of this biography from the pens of men who knew him well and saw much of him at close quarters.

Professor Gilbert Murray contributes accounts of three incidents which brought him into contact with Asquith as a public man, and perhaps helped to quicken the warm mutual sympathy and friendship which obtained between them in Asquith's later years.

> Some time in March 1914, in the midst of the Curragh crisis, I happened to be in the gallery of the House of Commons. The sight of the House rather shocked me. The opposition seemed wild with delight. There was a mutiny : There was to be a rebellion : The Government would fall and the Conservatives get office : All the questions, all the speeches had a ring of triumph. A powerful counter note was struck by a Labour Member, Colonel Ward, but it was a note almost equally dangerous. In ringing tones he warned the Tories that, if they wanted Civil War they could have it. If there was to be a mutiny in the Army, it would not be a Tory mutiny but a mutiny of the working class. The debate was exciting, but deplorable. It seemed as if nobody cared for the community as a whole ; it was all party or class. Then I found the Prime Minister was speaking. He had been violently attacked but he did not seem to notice the attacks. He spoke quietly, seriously, without a single heated word or attempt to score, pointing out that no mutiny had occurred, merely an improper question had been asked of the troops and that the Minister responsible had resigned. He went on to explain the steps the Government intended to take. At first I was disappointed. I had hoped for a reply that would satisfy my own indignation, and I did not get it. Then gradually the meaning of the Prime Minister's attitude dawned on me. This was the very thing I had been missing and longing for. Here was at least one man who, when faced with a grave national danger, thought simply how to meet it and see that it did not spread. He was speaking a different language altogether from the bevy of politicians who were baiting him. It was, I think, from this moment that my great admiration for Mr. Asquith began.
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> Early in May 1916 I was returning from a visit to the Front in France, and had arrived at Charles Roberts' house in London rather sea-sick and extremely dirty. There I found a telegram from a Mr. Wyatt of Cambridge, saying that his son Rendel Wyatt with a group of other Conscientious Objectors had been taken as prisoners to France, where it was intended to cause them to commit an act of disobedience in the presence of the enemy and then be put to death. I had heard of this plan before. It had been largely advertised among the prisons, and was intended to terrify the other objectors into Obedience. As a matter of fact nothing could well have been conceived more likely to win sympathy for the Objectors and inflame them to a frenzy of indignant martyrdom. I need hardly add that it was utterly illegal.
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> The telegram was two days old, and there was no time to lose. I set

off instantly to the House of Commons, saw my brother-in-law, Geoffrey Howard, and through him obtained an interview with Lord Derby, then Minister of War. Lord Derby was flustered and angry, and kept repeating meaningless phrases many times over, but maintained generally that of course the men would be shot if they disobeyed orders in France, and quite right too, and anyhow it was none of his business. Clearly no sympathy was to be expected in that quarter, and there came over me that feeling which was as normal as one's daily bread in the later wartime, a sort of resigned despair at seeing the lives and deaths of good men at the mercy of fools.

I went back to Geoffrey Howard, who said he would try to get me a few minutes with the Prime Minister. After some time he took me to the Prime Minister's room. Mr. Asquith was writing but presently looked up. I told him as concisely as possible the state of the case. His face darkened and he uttered the one word "Abominable!" Then, after a moment's pause, he added: "This is best dealt with by an order to the Commander-in-Chief." He wrote the order and told me to take it to Jack Tennant, the Under Secretary for War, to be sent at once to France. The whole interview took less than five minutes.

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It must have been in the summer of 1920 or 1921 that Arnold Toynbee was in my house, having just returned from Angora. He had with him a copy of the Turkish "National Pact," the gospel which summarized Mustapha Kemal's policy and inspired his almost miraculous success. It had some twelve paragraphs. It began by renouncing any claim over the parts of the old Turkish Empire which were inhabited by Arab majorities, but insisting on the retention of all regions where the majority was Ottoman. It incidentally abolished the Caliphate. It established the Millet system for minorities in place of the previous arrangements, and it had many detailed provisions, political and geographical. Toynbee believed that no copy of the Pact had come to England yet. At any rate it had not been published. I suggested that we should take it to Mr. Asquith at "The Wharf." We found him sitting in the garden reading Jane Austen. I explained that Toynbee had just arrived from Angora and showed him the Pact. He took it and read it article by article, commenting on each as he went. "No reason they should not have that." "Very sensible." "No; that was what they wanted in such-and-such a year. We could not agree to it because so-and-so." What struck me was the complete knowledge and sureness of touch with which he treated the document which he had never seen till that moment, and which was not by any means concerned with one of his special subjects. An onlooker, accustomed to the ways of Ministers, would have supposed that he had had it sent him some days before and had been duly coached by his Secretary. But with him it was different. He had no doubt at one time or another in his political life come across most of the questions raised by the Pact and he was not in the habit of forgetting things. "A good document," he said in closing, and turned the conversation to Miss Austen.

II

1926–1928 Mr. Vaughan Nash, for so many years his principal Private Secretary and trusted confidant, has set down a few memories which may find a place here :

> " The Private Secretary's intercourse with his Chief occurs for the most part between the acts, in the interludes of Cabinets, conferences, speeches, when the Minister is engaged in clearing up the evidence of business done, and preparing for the next encounter. On these occasions Mr. Asquith would of course be in undress—not to be confounded with *en pantoufles*—intent on the despatch of business, and despatching it with an economy of speech and manner altogether seamanlike. General Calwell has referred in an admirable sketch to his ' short-hand ' style on these occasions and described him pacing the room and growling out interrogations and comments. He never fussed. While the Cabinet was mustering downstairs he would be tranquilly pacing his room, jotting down items on the correspondence card that served for agenda paper, for there was no Cabinet Secretariat in those days. His point-blank directness was of the full Yorkshire quality. He employed a code of something between grunts and growls, signifying assent, dissent, interrogation. Or silence might serve him equally well. The Private Secretary as call-boy looks back on many such interludes, and retains an abiding impression of the formidable figure for ever going into action, cold, contained, inscrutable. But when he took his pencil and began to interline the drafts before him—answers to questions, letters, and so forth—his expression, as the Private Secretary soon observed, denoted something far removed from reprobation or impatience. It was the expression of the happy craftsman moulding his material, and perhaps enjoying the moment's respite from the voices which dog a Prime Minister through his interminable day. Luckily for them, the fumblers at his elbow met with a patience that was inexhaustible.
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> Later, the bell might ring, and he would be discovered in another guise—the genial conversable counsellor discussing a nice point with his colleagues, or presiding at a conference on one of the Bills then on the stocks, where his mastery of the subject and his unsurpassed skill in team work shone out. Whatever the occasion, there was the same easy mastery, sureness of touch, directness of approach. Disappointed deputations would troop out quite clear about his meaning and astonished at his grasp of their case, which he would have expounded to admiration. Mr. Asquith must indeed have found diversion in the superb dialectical skill with which he would build up his opponents' case before their wondering eyes before proceeding to demolish it. Apropos of his unruffled temper, I remember his saying to me one afternoon at the House when a refractory colleague of his was expected, ' You know I am really angry,' just as he might have remarked, ' It's odd, but I have a touch of temperature to-day.' A French artist (Caran d'Ache, I think) once did a cartoon of Mr. Asquith in which the folds of a large immobile face just failed to conceal an eye. This eye in ambush riveted you, for the artist had divined, what was the fact, that without appearing to notice, Mr. Asquith saw everything down to petty

points of routine and detail which most people, I suspect, never dreamt of his observing. Thus at golf he would know the whereabouts of his opponent's ball in the rough better than the caddie. On the eve of the Royal dinner at 10 Downing Street to celebrate the King's coronation he put his finger on the two weak spots in the organisation, one of which had to do with the working of the ventilator in the room where a play was to be given later in the evening. After a stormy meeting at Anstruther during one of the general elections a way had to be forced through a hostile crowd to the motor, the Scotland Yard man in attendance acting as spear-head. 'Never thought much of that man before,' remarked the Prime Minister when we got off, 'but the unobtrusive way he struck out was admirable.' No one else, I think, had noticed the detective's performance.

Everything about him was of a piece, and this perceptiveness was in keeping with the range and intensity of the intellectual scrutiny he turned on affairs. It is for others to tell of the use he made of his power in the tasks of statemanship, whether in marshalling and sifting evidence, weighing imponderables, giving shape to apparently formless matter, or stirring Blue-books and statistics into life. 'All relevant considerations will be taken into account,' he would tell the questioner in the House, and taken into account they were, in the cold, dry light of his logical intellect. This power of critical, concentrated, appraising vision exacted a certain armoured isolation for its exercise, and may have played a part in debarring him from cordial contact with the boring and banal. He had the pilot's sense of situation, which enabled him in a difficult Parliamentary situation to feel his way through fog and shoal, stand out to sea or anchor as the case demanded—an incommunicable sense.

There were occasions when I was summoned to his room for a gossip when he was taking his constitutional. Then his mood would be that of the amused spectator, intrigued by his colleagues' little ways, the idiosyncrasies of honour-hunters, or some question of appointments. Mr. ——'s hankering after a peerage was 'the funniest thing I ever heard.' His colleague X was being 'more exigent than usual.' Y's speech was 'somewhat ebullient'; and the none too friendly machinations and combinations of X, Y, and Z—one well remembers the stir they created were 'bizarre.' If a colleague had done particularly well, his satisfaction was great. A recent character sketch exhibits Mr. Asquith as lacking in generosity to opponents and rivals, and deficient in magnanimity: I should say he was intellectually incapable of jealousy, rancour, or malice. His character and temper were moulded on the grand scale, and it is surprising that anyone in contact with him should have failed to perceive this. To the world Mr. Asquith may still be unfathomable, but it is convinced, and rightly, about one thing, namely that he was the soul of generosity. The humanity and modesty of the man came out in the store he set by those who served him. His undemonstrativeness might suggest indifference, but if one of them fell out on the march he would say, 'So-and-so is irreplaceable.' Some of those around him may have little suspected the esteem in which he held them and the value he attached to their services."

III

1926–1928 No branch of Asquith's activities as Prime Minister interested him more than that which relates to ecclesiastical patronage and appointments. Sir Roderick Meiklejohn, now head of the Civil Service Commission, was during his period of supreme office concerned as one of his Private Secretaries with this sphere, and then and later a close personal friend. We are indebted to him for contributing the following impression:

> "As a preliminary to these short notes of my impressions of Lord O. I should say that I was associated with him from 1905 until his death. In 1905 I became Assistant Private Secretary to him as Chancellor of the Exchequer and when he became Premier I continued as his Private Secretary until the middle of 1911, when I left to take up a post in the Treasury. Thanks to his and Lady O.'s hospitality, even after I had ceased to be Private Secretary, I frequently saw him in London and in the country, and was in his company on such critical occasions as the outbreak of war and his resignation of the Premiership.
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> When at 10 Downing Street my main duties were in connection with ecclesiastical and academic patronage and Civil List Pensions and Royal Bounty Awards. There could never have existed, so far as Private Secretaries and Permanent Officials were concerned, a more considerate and less exacting chief than Lord O. Probably owing to his training at the Bar he was extraordinarily self-reliant and independent of extraneous assistance, and composed speeches and memoranda with the minimum of material prepared by others. His mind was so active and alert that when it was necessary to explain any matter orally to him I frequently had the feeling that my powers of concise exposition were woefully lacking and that what one wanted was a sort of 'shorthand' language to save his time and prevent him being bored.
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> Lord O. always shewed the keenest interest in making Church appointments and on ecclesiastical matters there can have been few laymen as well informed as he. He was well acquainted with past ecclesiastical history, had heard from his youth up many of the chief pulpit orators preach, and was on terms of friendship with many leading ecclesiastics and knew about the personalities and characteristics of very many more. He had little or no sympathy with the extreme High Church points of view, as he was by temperament and upbringing strongly Protestant in feeling, retaining until the close of his life what many would regard as an old-fashioned antipathy to the Roman Catholic Church. This Protestant bias, however, did not in any way affect his determination to select for Church appointments the persons he thought most suitable for the particular Bishopric, Deanery or Canonry that had to be filled. It was my duty to put before him a short list of the persons considered most suitable for any particular post and he weighed their respective claims with the most scrupulous care and, while he was always ready to receive the advice of the Archbishop of Canterbury, with whom he was very intimate, it was invariably on his own unbiased selection that a name

was submitted to the King. Nor was it only in the case of the higher positions in the Church that Lord O. devoted his time and attention. As First Lord of the Treasury he had the patronage of numerous rural and urban livings and he always attended to the filling of these with interest and care.

In making selections for ecclesiastical and other appointments Lord O. always attached, if not preponderating, yet very great importance to academic distinction and I remember that he felt particular pleasure in nominating Dr. Inge for the Deanery of St. Paul's, thereby restoring the tradition that the holders of this position should be eminent scholars.

As I was closely associated with him for so long a period it may be of interest if I specify what struck me as some of his salient characteristics. His gifts of intellect, his marvellous memory and his command of language require no stressing but what endeared him to all who came across him even casually, was his character. Simplicity, magnanimity, imperturbability, kindliness were his most prominent qualities : added to these was an extraordinary zest in life and the keenest interest in practically every form of activity, intellectual, artistic or social. I have heard him say that he was never bored and there were few subjects he could not talk interestingly about and few people he could not converse with, seemingly with pleasure. The width of his reading was prodigious and I remember him studying closely during a holiday in Scotland so comparatively out of the way a subject as Heraldry. He was an indefatigable sightseer of churches, museums, etc. He always retained a passionate love of the Greek and Latin Classics and there was no English author of repute whose work he did not know well. His knowledge of French literature was not so extensive but he had read much of Balzac and Anatole France. In novels his taste was rather early Victorian and even Meredith and Hardy did not particularly appeal to him and he would be rather impatient of the extremely psychological type of novel and of the novel with sex aspects strongly emphasised. He was diverted by detective novels and the stories of P. G. Wodehouse but his taste in modern novels would probably rather shock even a moderate high-brow of a younger generation than his.

This slight idiosyncrasy of his is attributable, I think, to a strong conservative element in his character and a dislike of change, merely as change, unless justified by cogent reasons. He had what might be described as an aristocratic, classical temper of mind, and he did not easily accommodate himself to many of the modern-day manifestations of a semi-literate democracy. He never, I think, realized the power of the Press at this time and certainly never made the least effort to conciliate or win its support. I always felt of him that he was born out of due time and that he would have been more at home in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and I think of him now consorting in the Elysian Fields with Walpole and Chatham, Fox and Pitt.

Lord O., although keenly enjoying social intercourse, never set out to shine as a conversationalist pure and simple. His intellect was more massive than original and in conversation he sought relaxation rather than artistic self-expression or the making of an effect. He was, however, a delightful raconteur and possessed a wide store of lively anecdotes more particularly about legal and academic celebrities and oddities. I rarely

1926–1928 heard him discuss politics. His sense of humour was of the keenest and he could be witty when he chose but his innate kindliness must often have checked his sallies owing to his abhorrence of causing pain. As an instance of this I remember making a reference to a caustic remark attributed to him about the son of a political opponent. Lord O., while not denying his authorship, firmly requested me not to give currency to the story.

Lord O. was fond of and particularly kind to children: he had no liking for animals but he was always gentle with the few that came his way. I should say that he much preferred the society of women to that of men as they had on him a soothing effect after his concentrated labours and were less likely than men to want to talk ‘shop.’ Despite, however, his liking for that sex he was, I am convinced, to his dying day an absolute disbeliever in woman suffrage, although the force of circumstances had compelled him to acquiesce in its institution.

When first I met Lord O. he still retained to those who did not know him a certain austerity which it is stated was characteristic of his youth and early middle age, but with advancing years he mellowed visibly. He was always to a certain extent aloof and reserved, but this was due to an innate modesty and a certain shyness coupled with a complete lack of egotism. Horace's lines on Quinctilius apply to Lord O. with peculiar appropriateness:

Cui Pudor et Justitiae Soror
Incorrupta Fides nudaque Veritas
Quando ullum invenient parem.”

IV

In 1928, shortly after Asquith's death, his friend Desmond McCarthy published in *Life and Letters* an appreciation of him under the form of a review of *Memories and Reflections*. We are glad to be allowed to republish extracts from this penetrating study:

“When I had finished Lord Oxford's *Memoirs and Reflections*, I, too, fell to remembering and reflecting. . . .

I am back in the narrow white dining-room of The Wharf, with its two garden windows. Sunday luncheon is in progress, and, as is often the case in that room, there are more guests than you might think it could accommodate, and more talk in the air than you would expect even so many to produce. The atmospherics are terrific. Neighbour is not necessarily talking to neighbour, nor, except at brief intervals, is the conversation what is called ‘general,’ that is to say three or four people talking and the rest listening. The conversation resembles rather a sort of wild game of pool in which everybody is playing his or her stroke at the same time. One is trying to send an opinion into the top corner pocket farthest from her, the player at which is attempting a close-up shot at his own end, while anecdotes and comments whizz backward and forwards, cannoning and clashing as they cross the table. Sometimes a remark will even leap right off it at somebody helping himself at the sideboard, who with back still turned, raises his voice to reply. And not only are half a dozen different discussions taking place simultaneously, but the guests are at different stages of the meal. Some have already reached coffee, others are not yet near the sweet; for everyone gets up and helps himself as he finishes a course. Now to get full enjoyment out of these surroundings it was necessary to acquire the knack of carrying on at least two conversations at once while lending an ear to a few others; a knack not so difficult to acquire as perhaps your first visit might have led you to expect. And if I remember what I happen to have been saying at a particular moment on such an occasion, it is on account of a remark which followed. I was shouting about autobiography: 'Yes, there are only three motives for writing it, though of course they may be mixed; St. Augustin's, Casanova's, Rousseau's. A man may write his autobiography because he thinks he has found "The Way" and wishes others to follow, or to tell us what a splendid time he has had and enjoy it again by describing it, or to show—that he was a much better fellow than the world supposed.' 'I'm glad to hear you say that,' said a voice behind me; I turned my head; it came from Mr. Asquith, who was cutting himself a slice of ham. 'That,' he added, before carrying back his plate to his seat, 'is just what I'm now trying to do.'

I knew that he was at work on this book, *Memories and Reflections*, 1852–1927." [After giving his impressions of the book Mr. McCarthy proceeds:] "It is noticeable that there is not a line in this book which expresses perplexity or dubiation; not a page in which we can watch him making up his mind. It has been always made up when he puts pen to paper. He explains his motives and reasons for having acted in such and such a manner, but we are given results, not the processes of deliberation. This is profoundly characteristic of him; so is the absence from it of all mention of feelings, whether of elation, disappointment, disillusion, resentment or satisfaction. Yet that he was a man of feeling could not escape the notice of anyone who saw him from a short distance. It is chiefly to bring out the implication of these characteristics which everyone could perceive, that I am now 'reviewing' this book. Many who have discussed and described Lord Oxford have not seen the main one.

In all the appreciations written after his death his 'impersonal' attitude was made a subject of comment, but amid all the praise lavished upon him there was frequently a suggestion that his master faculties were perhaps, after all, those of the judge or possibly the historian or scholar. That he was extraordinarily impartial, that he was a scholar and would have made an admirable historian was clear to all, but that he was a scholar, or historian, pitchforked into active life is, I believe, an utterly false reading of him. I knew him during twelve years, and for a considerable part of them I was on terms of affectionate familiarity with him, though never on those of intimacy. This was, at any rate, sufficient to enable me to form a positive opinion about his nature, and my conclusion was that the caste of his intellect and imagination was essentially that of a man of action. Being of a literary turn of mind myself, it was perhaps easier for me to detect the essential difference. Literature, too, requires 'detachment,' but the sense of proportion in the man of action is different. In the great master of affairs imagination is neither 'dreamful nor dramatic.' His observation is a process of direct calculation and inference;

1926–1928 he has not the habit 'of enacting in himself other people's inward experience or dwelling on his own.' In action, and in the calculations necessary to concluding rightly with a view to action, personal emotions are mostly irrelevant. Men of action often surprise us by the plainness and curtness of their comments. Their sayings may (vide the Duke of Wellington) often appear humorous in their seeming neglect of all aspects but one. This trait was very marked in Lord Oxford.

To brush aside what was insignificant and only to attend to the residue was an instinct in him. It may be illustrated by a story of his first meeting during his Paisley campaign, though the story also shows still more forcibly his attitude in the face of silly misrepresentation. There was only a very narrow Liberal majority and the election was a touch-and-go one. He had barely got a hearing for his speech—there was a strong Labour element in the audience, and interruptions had been fierce and frequent. When questions were reached one man asked him why he had murdered those working men in Featherstone in 1892. His instant answer was: 'It was not in 'ninety-two, but 'ninety-three.' A small inaccuracy was the only thing worth correcting in such a charge. And his reply to an American, who, after a somewhat lengthy preamble explaining how interested he was at last to meet him, 'after having heard President Wilson, Colonel House and your wife often talk about you'—'What did my wife say?' is decidedly in the vein of the Duke of Wellington. But more apposite examples can be found in this book. He wrote on August 2nd, 1914:

'Happily I am quite clear in my mind as to what is right and wrong. 1. We have no obligation of any kind either to France or Russia to give them military or naval help. 2. The dispatch of the Expeditionary Force to help France at this moment is out of the question, and would serve no object. 3. We must not forget the ties created by our long-standing and intimate friendship with France. 4. It is against British interests that France should be wiped out as a Great Power. 5. We cannot allow Germany to use the Channel as a hostile base. 6. We have obligations to Belgium to prevent it being utilized and absorbed by Germany.'

Such an entry is not at first sight impressive but examined it will be found to contain a complete summary of facts relevant to a possible decision. Note the word 'happily'— decision in certain events would be justified.

The more closely his career is examined in future, the more false the charge of 'indecision' is likely to appear. On the contrary as when he peremptorily prevented General French from retiring behind the Seine though the General declared the army to be in hopeless difficulties, or dealt with the Curragh complication, he will be seen to have exhibited at critical moments rapidity of resolution; and, still more often, that rare instinct for 'timing' a decisive action correctly so that it should occur at the most effective moment. That this involved sometimes delay incomprehensible to the public is, of course, true; but the art of statesmanship, and this is an important part of it, is incomprehensible to them.

His drawback as a leader during times of frenzied anxiety was a concomitant of his two strongest points: his immunity from the contagion of excitement, and his instinct to think things over by himself. There is a passage in one of his later letters in which he says there are three kinds of men: those who can think when they are by themselves—they are the salt of the earth—those who can only think when they are writing and talking, and those who cannot think at all—they, of course, are the majority. He was a man who did his thinking alone. To talk while he was still making up his mind was repugnant to him. In war, when the urgency of this or that measure is vividly brought home to those in immediate contact with one aspect and everybody is seething with projects and suggestions, self-withdrawn composure is apt to be exasperating, and the habit of postponing discussion to undermine a nervous confidence. Mr. Winston Churchill, in his article on Lord Oxford, gave an example of the surprise it was to find, after imagining that Lord Oxford had dismissed some urgent matter from his mind, that he had all the time thought it over and reached a conclusion upon it. Conversation did not help him, but when he met others in council they found that he was prepared.

I associate this characteristic in affairs with two others observable in his private life, his strong inclination to sidetrack avoidable emotional complications, and his reluctance to express opinions on any subject upon which he did not know his own mind completely. For instance, in his youth he had been interested in philosophy, and he still possessed that respect for thought which only those who have drunk a fair draught at the springs of thought retain. Yet because he did not think his opinion on such points instructed or know his mind upon them, he was unwilling to discuss the Universe or the life of man in its widest aspects. He would show you by a remark or two that he was even more aware than most people who are eager to discuss such problems of the general philosophical bearings of any particular theory, but he did not want to go into it. He had a great aversion from stuffing the blanks in his convictions with provisional thinking. It was the same in literature. He discussed readily only those aspects of it of which he felt he had a thorough comprehension. And since human beings are endless subjects, each one a forest in which it is only too easy to lose one's way, though he would listen with pleasure and amusement to ingenious interpretations, you felt they were far from impressing him deeply. He liked gossip and the quasi-intellectual discussion of character, but he himself rarely contributed to such discussions anything but the most obvious common sense.

His reluctance, in private as well as public, to discuss what was not yet clear to him seems to me to be the manifestation of a fundamental characteristic—one which I personally admire more than any other—a perfect integrity of mind. The foundation of his character was the adamant stone of intellectual integrity. It made magnanimity natural to him for, *est animi exiguique Ultio* (Revenge is the joy of a starved and puny soul). It made it easy for him to put aside personal considerations when the interests either of the nation or his party were concerned. At such junctures the soul of his honour was at stake, and I do not believe that the historian will discover one instance in his long career in which he risked it. (The shameful jettisoning of Haldane was not his work, but was forced upon him by the then inevitable Coalition.).

I have spoken of his mind above as, in my judgment, essentially that of a man of action. Such intellectual integrity is necessary to a man of action who can be trusted to be effective not merely once or twice, but continuously. Yet it also prevented him from touching some of those levers which circumstances may compel a man of action to pull. He could not make an unfair appeal. In the War he lost the confidence of the mob. The change from the Asquith to the Lloyd George régime was a change to an appeal to the subconscious and usually the baser side of it, both in the public and in those actively concerned in carrying on the War administratively. He knew all about such appeals, but he could not bring himself to make them. He was out of touch, therefore, with what is instinctive and emotional in human nature, and especially prominent at such times. In private life and in administrative he shrank from using authority or personal appeal as a weapon to produce conviction, and it was acute pain to himself to speak words which might give pain. After he had indicated the reasonable course he could not bring himself to do more ; it seemed, I expect, like an insult—a disloyalty—to use irrelevant means of persuasion—something certainly impossible where affection or trust existed. His opinion of human nature struck me as being neither high nor low. Where colleagues were concerned it might seem to have often been too high, in this sense, that he did not see (such may be the magnitude of the tasks of a statesman) that there was much difference between mediocrities—A was practically as good a man as B, though B was abler.

I was an ‘ Asquith man ’ long before I knew him, and I remember what attracted me when, on his appointment to the Premiership, the papers were discussing, as his ‘ one defect ’ his lack of magnetism, that it was precisely that that attracted *me.* I have no confidence in the steady sagacity of the so-called magnetic. And when I came to know him, the absence of either magnetism or any desire to impress, grew beautiful to me.

As a member of the public, I felt he sought our solid advantage and not our ridiculous patronage ; and as a friend, that there was in him that integrity of feeling and thought which is a permanent guarantee of noble actions.

His talk was that of a man who had more faith in facts than theories, more interest in records than conjectures—unless those were fantastic, when he could be amused by the ingenuity and recklessness of other people's opinions. I soon noticed that though he enjoyed cleverness, he never missed it in a companion whom he liked. He seemed to get more and more fond of people he was used to, and to suffer comparatively little from boredom, that common scourge of uncommon men. It did not matter if they were always the same. In fact, he seemed to like them to be so ; just as he never got tired of either the books, or the places, or the jokes, or the anecdotes which had once pleased him. He was even like a child in the pleasure he took in having something ‘ over again.’ This characteristic and the absolute self-sufficiency of his mind (not his heart) struck you. When he *was* bored, however, it appeared to be an unusually acute form of discomfort. Over the wine, after dinner, and under the spell of an unduly explanatory or pretentious talker, sounds which at first resembled considerate murmurs of assent, would gradually prolong themselves into unmistakable moans, terminating at last in a flurried gesture of hospitality and a sudden rise. Complacent long-windedness or attempts to draw him out were apt to produce these symptoms. At dinner, when in danger of being thus submerged, he would catch eagerly at any lifebelt of a remark thrown him by one of his children. That he should have enjoyed society, and taken so much of it during his life might seem incongruous in him, until we realise that he took it as a rest: amiable people, pretty women, bright lights, friendly festivity and remarks flying about which he could catch and reply to by employing an eighth of his intellect afforded effective distraction; it was a refreshment. Henry James, coming back once from a luncheon party at Downing Street during the War, remarked on 'the extraordinary, the admirable, rigid, intellectual economy' which the Prime Minister practised on such occasions.

One word more in conclusion. Lady Oxford, in her preface to *Memories and Reflections*, draws attention to an important fact which is not generally understood: he was an emotional man and a very sensitive one. Signs of that sensitiveness are his inability to ask for fairer treatment for himself, or to take any step to further the interests of his children. He could not bring himself to do such things. The strength of the emotional side of his nature is known to those he loved, but the following external signs of it are noteworthy. He covered his humiliations with silence, both in public and private. But, after his fall in 1916, though apparently bearing it with the greatest equanimity, the shock produced an attack which, for a few hours, was taken for paralysis; when his own followers did not take him at his word that it was impossible to work any longer with Mr. Lloyd George, the disappointment struck him down physically. Some time afterwards—I noted it, because it was a rare gleam of self-disclosure—he said, in dating an event, 'Ah, that was while I was recovering from my wound.' And once I remember, after he lost his seat—the conversation had turned upon metaphor and comparisons—he said to me: 'I will show you a comparison in poetry which moves me.' He took down a Coleridge and pointed to the lines:

Like an Arab old and blind
Some caravan has left behind

and then rather hurriedly left the room. But despair, whether about himself or public affairs, was to him mere weak-mindedness. He never indulged in pessimism—there again showing one of the traits of the man of action. Whether or not he thought of himself as a great man I could never discover. He probably would have said the term was an exceedingly vague one, and he would certainly not have trusted the reports of introspection on such a point."

A LAST WORD

SOMEONE said shortly after Asquith's death that he was the last of the Romans. There was truth and meaning in this saying. He was one of the long line who have come from the seats of learning and passed through the traditional stages to the highest place. His background was that of the old order with its respect for institutions, its sense of decorum in the public life, its dislike of advertisement and appeals to the mob. Circumstances made him the instrument of great democratic and Parliamentary changes, and for a period in his life all the winds of passion and prejudice raged about him. These storms he rode not with the exhilaration of the mob-leader, but with a cool and quiet patience which rebuked and sometimes exasperated the impatient, but which generally had behind it a driving power of which they were unaware. He was by nature a man of peace, but those who challenged him found that they had cause to beware when, after exhausting all the possibilities of peace, he took up their challenge.

A mere catalogue of the crises, conflicts, and perils, successive or simultaneous, which beset the country during the years of his Administrations would be sufficient to prove that the pilot who weathered these storms was a man of extraordinary qualities of brain and nerve. The overwhelming events of the Great War have blotted backwards in the memory of those who lived through them, and for the time being obscured their vision of what went before. But as British institutions evolve, the story of the Parliamentary struggle which preceded the War will recover its place in history, and the study of Asquith's part in them be of high importance. That part, from the rejection of the Budget in 1909 to the passing of the Parliament Act in 1911, reveals itself as an orderly sequence of events in which, if the conflict had to be, the democratic forces could hardly have been handled with greater sobriety and skill. The death of King Edward and the advent of his successsor broke the continuity at one point, but in the Constitutional Conference which followed, the arrangement with the Crown and the second election in 1910, we see the ground made sure at all stages, and every precaution taken so that the result should be decisive, and as little open to challenge on the ground of fairness as possible. Asquith's attitude during this period is not that of the revolutionary attacking the ancient constitution, but of a man of conservative disposition who is required by circumstances and events to defend it against an innovation which would have destroyed one of its central assumptions. He was in all this a great House of Commons man with not a little of the Puritan's zeal for the power and privilege of what he believed to be the greatest legislative Assembly in the world. And if in the last resort the appeal was to the Crown, there again he is seen anxiously seeking to keep the King out of public controversy, and thus to preserve the saving paradox of the Constitutional monarchy, which is that the Parliamentary attack should fall on the Minister who advises the Sovereign and not on the Sovereign for accepting his advice.

The characteristic Asquith is seen in these years, going his own way at his own pace, eschewing all mob oratory, working indefatigably for peace behind the scenes, disliking conflict for its own sake, but taking it up soberly and massively when he saw no other way, and then unflagging when others tired, and immovable, even remorseless, about the end in view. All these qualities are seen again in the last days before the War when he and Grey working together exhausted the possibilities of peace, and then turned soberly and grimly to face the terrible alternative.

When the War came, it was fated that a man of this temperament and disposition should find himself in conflict with those who demanded short cuts and quick returns. Kitchener's prediction, so horrifying to other members of the Government, that the War would last three years, left Asquith undismayed, and he deemed it his special duty as Prime Minister to stand between the soldiers in the field and all criticism that he thought impatient or unfair. It was highly honourable and won for him behind the scenes the reputation that he most valued, but his appearance month after month, taking upon himself the burden of all disasters and mistakes, and giving to others the credit for victories and successes, produced in time the impression that he in some exceptional way was responsible for delays and misfortunes for which all the Allies and all their statesmen were collectively to blame, if blame there was. In normal times this would have been corrected by the championship of colleagues and supporters coming to the rescue of their Chief against the attacks of opponents, but in war it left him exposed without defence to the attacks of newspapers or impatient critics who were convinced that they could win the War, if he were removed from the scene. It was perhaps fortunate for his successors that their claim to possess this secret was not exposed to the same stream of criticism and obloquy as had descended upon Asquith's head in the earlier years of the War.

His character was not all of one texture. Though he bore slings and arrows with unfailing stoicism when directed against himself, he had an extreme dislike of inflicting wounds upon others. This led him at times to postpone and evade unpleasant duties which had finally to be faced, and which became only more difficult and painful through the delay. The simplicity that refuses to believe evil, which was a very genuine part of his character, conspired with this dislike of wounding to give him the reputation of "waiting and seeing" which was the main reproach of his detractors. This characteristic was displayed in little things rather than big, and was far less important than the public was led to suppose, but the little things accumulated and damaged his reputation. He was, moreover, for a man of his formidable equipment, singularly lacking in the art of self-defence. He had never from the beginning of his career had to fight for any prize. The "effortless superiority" which he once said satirically was the mark of the Balliol man, was really his own prerogative and it separated him, *longo intervallo*, from all competitors in his rise to the highest place. But when finally he was attacked it left him an easy prey to his enemies and critics. In the atmosphere of war the weapons which they used—daily undermining in groups of newspapers, catch-words and opprobrious epithets constantly repeated—fell with deadly effect upon a man who hated publicity, and whose invariable and exasperating answer to his enemies was "silence when they brawl."

There was no mock modesty in Asquith; his failing was rather a certain arrogance which made him rate his enemies too low, and blinded him to the powers and qualities of men who were not of his school and tradition, the business men, the men of push and go, the very modern men who were more and more demanding their place in the sun. This new throng pressed upon him, challenging his authority and questioning his methods, and found him too proud to fight. But they disclosed what had undoubtedly become a defect in the man who was the leader of his country in war. Mr. Bonar Law said a true word when he told Asquith that a Prime Minister must not only be active but seem active in war-time. The shop-window must be dressed, the sense of dramatic movement imparted to the country; there must be no shivering and shrinking at the dreadful word propaganda. Propaganda there must be, and not only against the

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The judgment passes to history and it would be presumptuous of his biographers to claim the final word about the man who steered his country through the nine most critical and perilous years of its existence, years which for centuries to come will be the subject of research and controversy. But this at least may be said. Respect for Asquith's character and qualities has steadily risen in the years since his death. As time passes, his detractors fall into the background, and his figure is seen in massive outline embodying the qualities which Englishmen most like to think of as their own, fortitude, dignity, honesty, generosity, the equal mind in arduous affairs. Colleagues speak of his generosity and entire lack of vanity and jealousy ; soldiers of his loyal support and ready understanding of their problems and difficulties, his coolness and steadiness in time of great danger. Friends speak of the warm-hearted and deeply affectionate nature under the outward reserve. Among all those who assailed him in his lifetime none ever charged him with meanness or deceit. He handed on untarnished to his successor the great traditions of the English public life. Many eminent men have made claims for themselves which history has failed to endorse, but it may be said of Asquith that the curtain is seldom lifted on his work behind the scene without the discovery being made that he deserved far more than he ever claimed for himself, or than some of his contemporaries knew.

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Note.—In this index the following abbreviations are used: A. J. B. for the Earl of Balfour; C.-B. for Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman; H. H. A. for Lord Oxford and Asquith; and Ll. G. for D. Lloyd George.

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